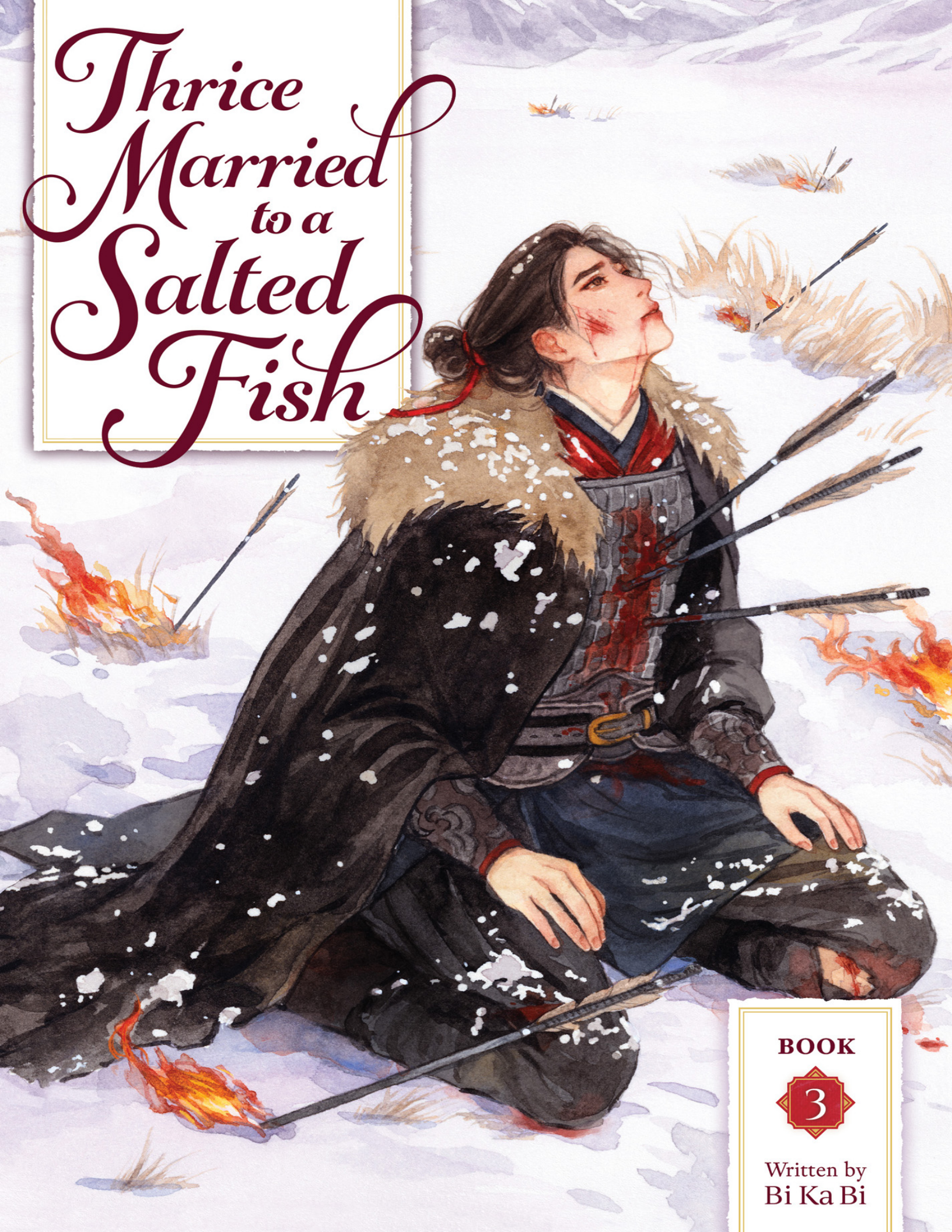
Thrice Married to a Salted Fish



BOOK 3

Written by
Bi Ka Bi

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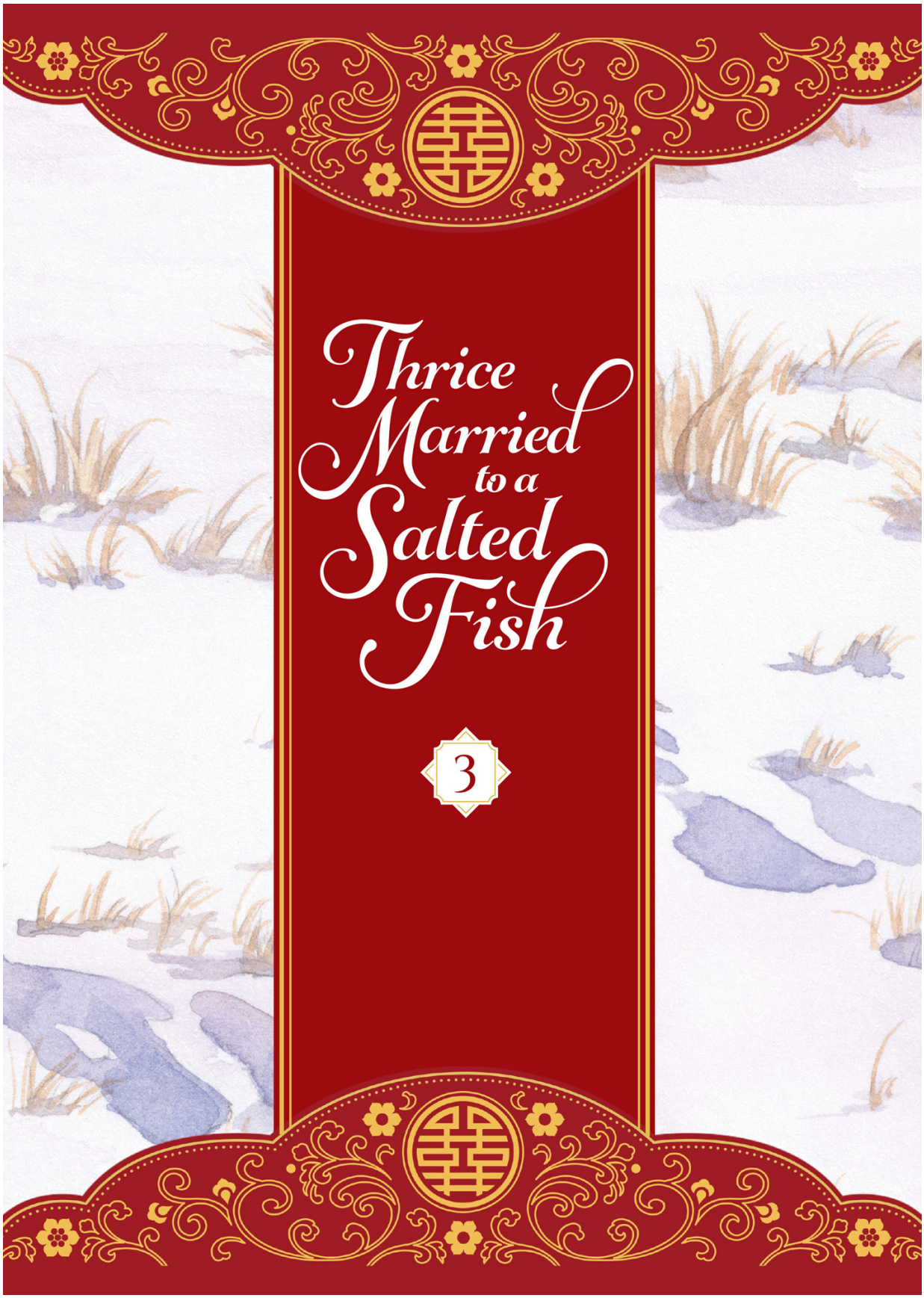
Thrice Married to a Salted Fish
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Chapter 74

GU FUZHOU TURNED THE WORDS “maybe you’re wrong” over and over in his mind. Maybe he was wrong about Lin Qingyu not missing him; maybe he was wrong about Lin Qingyu only liking girls.

What in the world was Lin Qingyu trying to say? Why hadn’t he given Gu Fuzhou a direct answer? Could Lin Qingyu’s feelings for him be like those song lyrics…? “If what you feel for me isn’t love yet, don’t lie to me; it’s just a hint of affection”?[1]

He wanted to ask more, but the tipsy Lin Qingyu’s eyes had already shut, his fingers still pinching Gu Fuzhou’s cuff.

There’s no rush. Take it slow, Gu Fuzhou comforted himself. *This is how you’ll show that you’re sincere. He’s straight, and straight guys need some time to cut their sleeves.*[2] A mere two years since they’d first met, he and Lin Qingyu had already shared a hug. If that great progress kept up, he might get to kiss Lin Qingyu on the forehead after eight years. Ten years at most.

Damn it all.

Gu Fuzhou no longer needed any hangover soup. He disrobed and lay down beside Lin Qingyu, sharing a bed with him once again. His arousal showed no signs of receding. He hadn’t expected that this body—that of a man in his thirties—would be so excitable, even after he’d had some wine. It felt uncomfortable at this point. Still, it was true that this body was overdue for a release; tamping that desire down would be unhealthy.

Gu Fuzhou gazed at Lin Qingyu’s sleeping visage for a while, feeling a carnal want blaze through his heart like wildfire. Then he glanced around the room. A piece of cloth he could use to wipe himself clean hung on a rack a few steps from the bed. But there was no hot water here, so if he really did wind up doing something, he’d have to call a servant over to fetch a basin of hot water to wash his hands. And it was so cold outside, while his bed was so warm.

Gu Fuzhou dithered, dithered, and kept dithering about it a bit longer, then finally gave up and reclined fully again.

Forget it and go to sleep, he told himself. *Once you fall asleep, this won't be on your mind. And who knows—maybe you'll get up to something exciting in your dreams.*

***

On the first day of the new year, Lin Qingyu woke an hour later than usual. On the occasions when he drank wine, it improved the quality of his sleep, which was why he'd slept exceptionally well the previous night and awoken refreshed.

He felt a bit parched, though. Wriggling a little in the blankets, he felt his back collide with a warm, firm chest. He'd only been tipsy the previous night, so he remembered everything he'd said and done vividly. He hadn't even been sound asleep when Gu Fuzhou climbed into bed with him.

Gu Fuzhou had asked him whether he still only liked girls. Lu Wancheng had asked him that too before his death. Lin Qingyu had given completely different answers each time.

What did Gu Fuzhou think about the matter, though?

Lin Qingyu still remembered how, the day after he'd married Lu Wancheng, the young marquess had proclaimed repeatedly that he didn't like men. Then he'd pestered Lin Qingyu into completing the ceremony that would make them sworn brothers just so that they could address each other as such.

If a pair of close friends cut their sleeves, they had to do it at the same time. If one went through with it, and the other didn't, that'd only bring a world of pointless trouble.

Lin Qingyu lay there for a while before starting to get up. He was on the side of the bed closest to the wall, so Gu Fuzhou was sleeping on the outer side, blocking his exit route. To get out of bed, he'd have no choice but to climb over the general.

Gu Fuzhou was sound asleep, which usually meant that not even an earthquake could rouse him. Lin Qingyu figured that he didn't need to worry about waking him, but he tried to move gently nonetheless. He'd just swung a leg across Gu Fuzhou when the man suddenly rolled over, causing Lin Qingyu to lose his balance and fall into a sitting position atop Gu Fuzhou's waist.

Thin as Lin Qingyu was, he still had an adult man's build. When his weight abruptly landed on Gu Fuzhou, the general furrowed his brow, then forced his eyes to open.

Meeting Gu Fuzhou's gaze, Lin Qingyu felt—for the first time in his life—at a loss on what to do. His current position seemed inappropriate.

Lin Qingyu's ebony hair cascaded down his shoulders and back, and twin locks also flowed down his chest. Gu Fuzhou gazed at him for a while before exhaustion consumed him and his eyes drooped shut again.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Lin Qingyu made to get out of bed—but was stopped by hands cinching both sides of his waist.

"Running away, are you?" His deep voice was laced with amusement; his eyes were still shut.

"I'm getting out of bed for some water," Lin Qingyu replied calmly.

"If you wake up early on the first day of the year, you'll be compelled to do the same for the rest of it," Gu Fuzhou warned, trying to scare him.

"That won't be any trouble for me," Lin Qingyu replied, amused. "Now let go. I could really use some tea."

Gu Fuzhou refused to relent. Instead, the arm around Lin Qingyu's waist pulled him down, stuffing him back under the brocade blankets. Hearing Gu Fuzhou mutter something under his breath, Lin Qingyu leaned closer and realized that Gu Fuzhou was counting down: "Five, four, three…"

When he'd counted down to "one," his eyes snapped open. He yanked his blankets off, hopped out of bed, and strode toward the charcoal brazier in the outer room. There, he quickly filled a cup with tea, which he then carried to the bed for Lin Qingyu. The moment Lin Qingyu took the

cup, Gu Fuzhou immediately dove back into bed. “It’s cold! So cold! I’m going to be frozen stiff!”

The tea, warmed over charcoal throughout the night, was a bit too hot. Lin Qingyu sat on the bed, taking small sips to alleviate the dryness in his throat left by the wine he had drunk the night before.

Ensconced in his blankets, Gu Fuzhou watched the freshly awoken beauty drink tea. He’d wanted to deal with his arousal the previous night, but the cold had dissuaded him. It wasn’t any warmer this morning, yet he’d woken up in ten seconds and headed to the outer room just to pour Lin Qingyu some tea.

Damn it, Gu Fuzhou couldn’t help thinking. *I really do like him a lot.*

After Lin Qingyu slowly finished his tea, Gu Fuzhou took the empty cup from him and set it casually by the side of the bed. “Now that you’re not thirsty anymore, can you lie here with me?”

“You have the day off today—no one will stop you from sleeping in,” Lin Qingyu said. “Why are you insisting on doing it with me?”

“It’s so boring when I’m alone,” Gu Fuzhou replied with a smile. “But if we lie here together, we can chat too.”

“About what?”

A moment of contemplation later, Gu Fuzhou suggested, “Let’s play Last and First but with idioms.”

Lin Qingyu shot him a glance. “Qinghe stopped playing that game when he was five. Are you sure you want to play it?”

“You think my idea is childish, Physician Lin? All right, then, let me tell you how to become a skilled jungler.”[3]

“Why would you want to become a skilled juggler?” Lin Qingyu asked, perplexed.

They nestled into the blankets, talking absently about meaningless things. Before they knew it, the sun was already high in the sky. Lin Qingyu had never gotten out of bed so late, except when he was sick. Gu Fuzhou had truly rubbed off on him. After being in this layabout’s company for so long, even Lin Qingyu couldn’t help lazing around sometimes.

That said, he had to admit that staying in bed with Gu Fuzhou on a cold winter day felt quite nice.

Gu Fuzhou's parents had already passed, and no guests would visit the residence on the first day of the year, so no one would interrupt the couple regardless of how late they rose. Eventually, they went to wash up before having lunch together.

The servants who'd stayed in the residence during the New Year holiday took turns greeting their masters with well-wishes. Lin Qingyu had Yuan Yin distribute bonus money he'd prepared in advance to the servants. Naturally, Huantong and Hualu's rewards were several times bigger than the others'.

"Thank you, Young Master, and thank you, General," Huantong said cheerfully, reward money in hand. "May you have all that you desire, Young Master, and may everything you wish come true. And may you become younger by the day, General—achoo!"

"Caught a cold?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Huantong wiped his nose with his fingers. "It's been freezing these past couple of days," he complained. "When I cover myself with blankets in bed, it's like I'm inside an ice cellar."

"Oh, my. Really?" Gu Fuzhou drawled. "I can't believe that some of you don't have a wife to warm your blankets for you on a cold winter day!"

Huantong had nothing to say to that.

Lin Qingyu shot Gu Fuzhou a look, telling him to shut up, then beckoned Yuan Yin over. "From today on, double the amount of charcoal in every room during the winter."

After the servants dispersed, Gu Fuzhou took out a heavy pouch. "Happy New Year, Qingyu. Here—some lucky money[4] for you."

Lin Qingyu was confused. "But you're younger than me. Why are *you* giving me lucky money?"

"In this body, I'm twelve years older than you," Gu Fuzhou replied. "And in my hometown, it's customary for husbands to give wives money."

Lin Qingyu smiled softly. "Thank you."

Gu Fuzhou smiled too. “Now that I’ve wished you a happy New Year, shouldn’t you also wish it to me in return?”

“Certainly.” Lin Qingyu shook out his sleeves, then brought his hands together, raised them to eye level, and bowed slightly. “‘My first wish is that you, my husband, will live a thousand years. My second wish is that I, your wife, will enjoy enduring good health.’”[5]

Lin Qingyu conducted himself with the elegance and poise of a cultured scholar. In comparison, Gu Fuzhou felt like his New Year’s gesture toward his wife had resembled the attempt of a child playing house.

He knew the poem Lin Qingyu had quoted; it described a married couple exchanging toasts and well-wishes before a spring banquet. In quoting it, Lin Qingyu had wished his husband a happy New Year.

Gu Fuzhou reciprocated Lin Qingyu’s gesture, doing as his wife had. “‘Third, I wish for us to live like two swallows perched side by side and be with each other for eternity.’”[6]

That afternoon, news that Xiao Jie was being made prince of Ning reached the general’s residence. When he heard, Gu Fuzhou affected an air of seriousness. “Prince of Ning, you say? That’s a great title. Every prince made the prince of Ning ends up rising in rebellion.”

“You’re wrong,” Lin Qingyu corrected him. “We won’t have him rise in rebellion; we’ll have him commit treason.”

Though it was subtle, there was a difference between the two. The former referred more to gaining military power, while the latter centered on scheming to overthrow the nation’s current ruler. Lin Qingyu had no plans to deploy soldiers unless absolutely necessary, and he didn’t want to steal the throne from the Xiao family. What he wanted to see unfold was a tightly interconnected chain of events that would result in the total upheaval of the imperial court. The nation might still be ruled by someone surnamed Xiao in the end; it just wouldn’t be Xiao Cheng.

“Only you could speak of committing treason so mildly, my wife,” Gu Fuzhou remarked, smiling.

***

After Lin Qingyu had spent one more day at home with Gu Fuzhou, the emperor summoned him to the palace to take his pulse.

As he headed to the emperor's bedchambers, Lin Qingyu came across Xiao Jie, who was leaving the palace after greeting the emperor. He wore princely robes the color of azurite, as well as a preoccupied facial expression.

Lin Qingyu stopped to acknowledge him. "Greetings, Your Highness."

Seeing him, Xiao Jie grinned, revealing a set of pristine, delicate teeth. "Ah, Physician Lin. Are you here to take Father's pulse?"

"Yes," Lin Qingyu said. "Congratulations, Your Highness. Having heard the great news, the general and I have made plans to visit Your Highness on an auspicious date."

Xiao Jie sighed. "Don't even mention that." He waved his hand. "I can't possibly do the position justice."

Though he already had the answer, Lin Qingyu asked anyway: "Why not?"

"Father doesn't want me to idle around, so he's assigned me duties!" Xiao Jie complained, pitching his voice low.

Lin Qingyu smiled slightly. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"Hardly! He sent me to the Ministry of Revenue, and I'm supposed to work with the marquess of Nan'an to collect military provisions the army stationed in the northwest will need for the year," Xiao Jie continued. "But I don't know how to do any of that! Father has always given those tasks to Taizi[7]-gege, but now he's suddenly dumping them all on me."

"You have no cause to worry, Your Highness," Lin Qingyu reassured him. "I imagine Steward Xi can relieve some of your burdens."

Xiao Jie sighed. "I hope so." At that point, something else surfaced in his mind. "That reminds me, Physician Lin. A-Rong was telling me yesterday that you forgot to give him the secret behind making the tea. He's planning to visit the general's residence to ask you for it."

Lin Qingyu smiled faintly. “Please let him know that I’m waiting for him.”

Chapter 75

THE EMPEROR'S HEALTH NOW was the same as it had been before the new year; his headaches were better at some times, but worse at others. He was aging, and ever since migraines had begun tormenting him two years earlier, he'd drunk more medicine than tea. Worse, he'd been leading court meetings and handling governmental duties despite having felt unwell recently. He now looked much older, his hair whitening at the temples; he seemed lethargic and listless, even when his head didn't hurt.

The emperor's health impacted the entire nation. Thus, it needed to be treated with all due seriousness. Lin Qingyu wasn't the only court physician checking on the emperor; Chu Zhengde and Lin Rushan also took the emperor's pulse regularly and prescribed him medicine for health and well-being.

During the previous dynasty, a consort had bribed imperial physicians in an attempt to commit regicide. Consequently, the emperor never placed his trust in any specific court physician. Prescriptions Lin Qingyu had jotted down for the emperor would be vetted thoroughly by the Department of Imperial Physicians to ensure that nothing was wrong with them before the medicine could be brewed. Prescriptions for the crown prince were treated similarly.

Unfortunately, both men's bodies remained feeble, and their health improved little, despite being treated with the utmost care.

On the fifth day of the new year, Xi Rong visited the general's residence bearing gifts. He came alone this time, though; Xiao Jie, now the prince of Ning, would be subject to considerable scrutiny from imperial censors if he visited the great general's estate as he had before. Xiao Jie respected Gu Fuzhou deeply and enjoyed Lin Qingyu's beauty, so he'd wanted to come along, but Xi Rong had told him not to.

Lin Qingyu didn't really care about Xiao Jie; Xi Rong was the only guest who mattered. And this time, when Lin Qingyu invited Xi Rong to drink tea at the same table, Xi Rong acquiesced.

“Do you like the gift I gave His Highness, Steward Xi?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be visiting your residence solely to express my thanks,” Xi Rong replied.

“I assumed that you were just here to wish me a happy New Year,” Lin Qingyu said politely.

“I’m curious, Lady, about how you convinced the marquess of Nan’an and the empress to support His Highness.” Xi Rong lifted his cup and took a sip. With a chuckle, he added, “This is good tea indeed.”

“As long as a gift arrives, why worry about its provenance, Steward Xi?”

No longer content with talking in riddles, Xi Rong cut to the chase. “I merely want an answer to this—can I presume that both the empress and the marquess of Nan’an are on His Highness’s side?”

Lin Qingyu didn’t offer a direct response. “What you need to do, Steward Xi, is support His Highness however you can and help him regain the emperor’s favor. Someone else will worry about the rest.”

Xi Rong knew who that “someone else” was. Lin Qingyu obviously wanted to be the one pulling the strings behind the scenes; Xi Rong and Xiao Jie alike were nothing but two pieces on his weiqi[8] board. After Lin Qingyu got what he wanted, would they be discarded? That was anyone’s guess.

Making a deal with Lin Qingyu was no different from asking a tiger for its hide—it would never work out, because their best interests conflicted. But he was left with no other option to achieve his goal. Anyway, no one could yet say for certain who the tiger was in this scenario.

Xi Rong smiled. “Thanks to your words, Physician Lin, His Highness and I can finally cast our worries aside.”

After chatting briefly about tea ceremony, Xi Rong rose and bade Lin Qingyu goodbye. Before leaving, he remarked, “Now that you and the general have given His Highness such a valuable gift, I fear my gift in return may be inadequate. What does the general want—troops? Power?

Please inform me, Lady, so that His Highness can fulfill his promise properly in the future."

"Don't worry, Steward Xi. The general merely wants to be a wealthy man living his life in leisure without crossing anyone," Lin Qingyu assured him.

"How about you, then, Lady?"

"Me?" Lin Qingyu had never thought about it. Most of what he'd done had been to protect himself. If Xiao Cheng and the emperor had never set their sights on him, nor done so much to pressure Gu Fuzhou into marriage, Lin Qingyu probably wouldn't have reached this point.

Once their plan succeeded, Gu Fuzhou could live out his dream of becoming a salted fish, loafing around and waiting for death to befall him. He could even become a eunuch if he really wanted to.

What about Lin Qingyu, though? What did *he* want?

Remembering the lines from "Spring Banquet," Lin Qingyu soon had his answer. "First, I want to study medicine without any distractions. Second, I want…to always be by the general's side."

Treason was a serious crime punishable by the execution of one's entire extended family. Xi Rong had assumed that Gu Fuzhou and Lin Qingyu had taken such high risks, expending such effort, because they coveted the nation the royal family ruled. Thus, he was predisposed to think that Lin Qingyu's response was perfunctory and insincere. But when he saw the gentleness that had seeped into Lin Qingyu's frigid gaze—unbeknownst to Lin Qingyu himself—Xi Rong found himself starting to believe his words.

"Is it that simple?" he asked, doubtful.

Lin Qingyu smiled. "It *is* that simple."

After seeing Xi Rong out, Lin Qingyu called for Huantong, but Hualu came instead. Lin Qingyu told her to have the kitchens slaughter a sheep and slice its flesh thinly; the general wanted to eat mutton hot pot for dinner. He'd mentioned it the previous night, when he and Lin Qingyu were about to go to bed. Mutton was a nourishing food; its benefits included

invigorating one's digestive system and boosting one's qi, which made it an ideal dish for winter.

"Yes, Young Master," Hualu said.

Then Lin Qingyu asked casually, "Where's Huantong?"

"His cold has worsened," Hualu reported. "He's been resting in his room all day."

Lin Qingyu's brow creased slightly. "If he caught a cold, why didn't he come to me?"

"Who knows?" Hualu shrugged. "Perhaps he doesn't want to trouble you, Young Master."

Lin Qingyu found Huantong in a side room. Servant boys who waited on their masters at close quarters, like Huantong, tended to sleep near the main rooms. That said, Lin Qingyu treated Huantong differently from the other servants, and the general's residence had more rooms than masters, so Huantong had a chamber to himself.

Lin Qingyu knocked. When he heard Huantong say "Come in," he pushed the door open.

Huantong was lying in bed, but upon seeing his young master, he tried to get up. He evidently pulled something in the process; his face scrunched up, and his words left his mouth in a pained yelp: "Y-Young Master!"

"Don't move." Walking over to the side of the bed, Lin Qingyu rested the back of his hand on Huantong's forehead. "Whatever you have, it's not a cold. So…what's actually ailing you?"

"I-I had a fall," Huantong stuttered, face scarlet.

"Why say that you caught a cold, then?" Lin Qingyu asked flatly. "You've learned to lie to me, I see."

"I wasn't lying!" Huantong knew that the cat would come out of the bag eventually, and through the pain he managed to admit, "When I was at the kitchens yesterday, a goat kicked me…"

"Where?"

Huantong looked petulantly down at his groin.

When realization dawned, Lin Qingyu couldn’t help but chuckle. “Does it hurt?”

Huantong nodded. “It hurt so much, I thought I was going to die.”

He would indeed be in pain beyond what an ordinary man could tolerate. “Take off your pants,” Lin Qingyu commanded. “I’ll look.”

Since Huantong had been a young boy when he first started serving Lin Qingyu, he shouldn’t have felt shy in front of his young master at this point. But he didn’t want Lin Qingyu, who was akin to an immortal deity in Huantong’s eyes, to see anything unclean. Thus, he hesitated, removing his pants only when Lin Qingyu’s expression cooled.

With a clean wooden stick, Lin Qingyu pushed aside the fabric of Huantong’s pants and prodded the relevant spot. Huantong hissed in pain, his legs trembling uncontrollably. It *really* hurt.

The goat had done a number on Huantong. The affected area was red and swollen; medicine needed to be applied.

The sight didn’t ruffle Lin Qingyu at all. It was as he’d thought: To him, other bodies were merely lumps of flesh. It was only when he touched Gu Fuzhou’s body that he felt his hands would break out in sores.

“I’ll have medicine delivered to you. Apply it to the affected area for a few days until the swelling subsides, and you’ll be fine.” Lin Qingyu looked out the window. “What time is it now?”

“It’ll be evening soon,” Huantong replied.

Gu Fuzhou’s return was still a long time away. After a moment of consideration, Lin Qingyu told Yuan Yin to prepare a carriage.

“Are you heading to the Imperial Academy of Medicine, Lady?” Yuan Yin asked.

“No,” Lin Qingyu answered. “To the barracks.”

The military barracks, located about thirty miles farther into the capital’s outskirts, were where the Iron Cavalry responsible for guarding the city trained. When Gu Fuzhou, who was known for his godly prowess in waging war, had refused to do just that, the emperor had no choice but to have Gu Fuzhou train the cavalry instead. This way, he could still serve his proper purpose, after a fashion.

This was Lin Qingyu's first time visiting the barracks. The moment he got out of his carriage, he sensed several sharp looks directed at him.

A guard armed with a saber stopped him. "And who might you be?"

"He's the general's wife," the carriage driver said.

"The general's wife?" The guard studied Lin Qingyu, looking him up and down. He'd heard that the general's wife was a great beauty, and the man standing before him was indeed beautiful. On top of that, he'd been driven here in a carriage that belonged to the general's residence. But despite knowing who Lin Qingyu was, the guard followed the rules as instructed. "Please complete the facial recognition process, Lady."

"Facial recognition process?" Lin Qingyu said, confused. "What's that?"

"In brief, those whose faces we recognize can enter directly. New visitors, on the other hand, have to register before we report their arrival to the great general."

Lin Qingyu registered, and meanwhile, the general was informed of his visit. The moment he set down the brush, he heard a familiar voice. "Qingyu."

In the barracks, Gu Fuzhou looked completely different from when he was at home. His long hair was all tied up, leaving not even a single strand down, which accentuated his face's sculpted features. When he strode toward Lin Qingyu, his cape billowed behind his towering figure, dark red streaking through the air.

Standing across from Lin Qingyu, Gu Fuzhou lowered his gaze to his wife. "Why the sudden visit?"

Lin Qingyu knew that Gu Fuzhou needed to keep up his appearance at the barracks. "I'm here to take you home, General."

If Gu Fuzhou had been at home, he'd probably have been grinning from ear to ear. He didn't show much of a reaction now, though; only his eyes shone with elation. "I have to stay one more hour before I can leave. Come with me."

Lin Qingyu followed him through the barracks. He was brilliantly beautiful, with an equally cold aura—a contrast most people found

irresistibly attractive. Thus, his presence had a deep impact everywhere he went. Most of the men they walked past were soldiers who seldom had the opportunity to cast their eyes on such beauty, and anyone would have wanted to look twice. Still, they all respected and feared the great general, and that respect naturally extended to the general's wife, so they made sure their gazes didn't wander.

Gu Fuzhou brought Lin Qingyu into his tent, then told everyone to leave. After that, his true colors spilled out instantly. He grabbed Lin Qingyu's hand and pulled him down to sit beside him, beaming. "I didn't expect you to come pick me up from work, Physician Lin. What's the great occasion, I wonder? Is this just an excuse to see whether I'm behaving?"

"Huantong was kicked by a goat," Lin Qingyu replied. "So I thought of you."

"Hm? Are these two sentences related somehow?" Gu Fuzhou was befuddled. "*I've* never been kicked by a goat."

Lin Qingyu smiled and said nothing. He scanned the tent, noting that it looked nice and proper. "What do you usually do here?"

"Feed my horses and lift weights, then go to sleep."

Lin Qingyu got the message. "Anything but your job, essentially."

"You can't say that." Gu Fuzhou fiddled with the fur collar of Lin Qingyu's marten coat. "I've made significant contributions to the Iron Cavalry."

"Such as?"

"Boosting army morale and serving as a bright light that guides the way when the soldiers are in low spirits." Gu Fuzhou rose and crossed his hands behind his back, wearing a solemn expression. "I tell them, 'The emperor can only settle comfortably on his throne if you work harder. The noble consort can only wear grander accessories in her hair if you eat less. The journey ahead of us is lengthy and arduous, but we, men of Great Yu, do not fear exhaustion or suffering. Give yourselves a chance. Give Great Yu a chance.

"'Your lives are fleeting, passing in the blink of an eye. If you don't work hard in your youth, regret will consume you when you grow old. I'm

sure everyone's tempted to slack off, but as long as you give your all, you will one day triumph against your indolence. There is no task in the world that is too difficult; there are only people who refuse to put in the blood, sweat, and tears…'"

"You tell other people to do things you yourself can't," Lin Qingyu said, feeling indignant on behalf of the many generals and soldiers who adored Gu Fuzhou. "How shameless, considering that you aren't even from here."

"Well, what choice do I have when hot-blooded men like hearing that stuff?" After that long monologue, Gu Fuzhou was parched. There were no tea sets in the barracks, only waterskins, so he uncorked one and drank from it. Then he asked Lin Qingyu, "Want some?"

Lin Qingyu took the waterskin, using his handkerchief to wipe the opening. When he was about to drink from it, though, Gu Fuzhou snatched the vessel back. As Lin Qingyu looked at him in confusion, he threw his head back and drank once again. Then he stuffed the waterskin back into Lin Qingyu's grasp.

"Drink," he ordered, brooking no refusal.

Lin Qingyu looked down intently at the opening, and Gu Fuzhou couldn't see the corners of his lips curve upward. "I don't feel that thirsty now, I think."

"You aren't even willing to touch my mouth indirectly, Physician Lin?" Gu Fuzhou scoffed. "What, scared your mouth will break out with sores?"

Lin Qingyu nodded. "A little."

Gu Fuzhou was so annoyed that he huffed a laugh. Then, for the first time ever, he began to throw his weight around. "You must drink from this today, Lin Qingyu. Don't even think of leaving this place without doing so."

Lin Qingyu looked up from beneath his lashes. "If I really want to leave, will you stop me, General?"

Gu Fuzhou raised his hand. Before Lin Qingyu registered it, he'd removed the hairpin holding his wife's hair up. Lin Qingyu couldn't

possibly leave the tent with his hair down—not when there were so many soldiers outside.

Gu Fuzhou twirled the hairpin in his fingers before closing his palm around it. “Drink, and I’ll give this back.”

Lin Qingyu looked at Gu Fuzhou. “Why do you like removing hairpins so much? Did you develop this habit back in your hometown?”

“You’re the reason I have this habit,” Gu Fuzhou retorted coolly. “I’m afraid that you’d call me a pervert if I touched any part of you besides your hair.”

It’s fine as long as he hasn’t done it to any young women. Taking the waterskin, Lin Qingyu threw his head back and drank. “Satisfied now?” He didn’t have the faintest idea what was so important about this indirect touch.

Gu Fuzhou was satisfied—but not fully. With an insincere smile, he replied, “I didn’t expect that you’d still be so disdainful of me, Physician Lin.”

“I’m not,” Lin Qingyu reassured him. “I was joking.”

“Really?”

“If I really had such disdain for you, why would I let you into my bed?”

Just like that, Gu Fuzhou was convinced. He helped Lin Qingyu put his hair up again. “So you’ve learned to joke around, Physician Lin.” Then he asked pointedly, “Who’d you learn that from?”

Lin Qingyu refused to give Gu Fuzhou the answer he wanted. “Huantong, naturally. He likes to joke around; you know that.”

Gu Fuzhou chuckled. “You’re not here to pick me up from work, wife—you’re here to make me die of rage in the barracks, aren’t you?”

When it was time, they took the carriage home together. After Lin Qingyu told Gu Fuzhou about Xi Rong’s visit, Gu Fuzhou concluded, “On our side, we have the empress, the marquess of Nan’an, and a number of military officials. And now Xi Rong and Xiao Jie are on board too. We basically have everything we need to set our plan in motion—except the final piece.”

“You have me, positioned close to the emperor,” Lin Qingyu added.

Gu Fuzhou was aware of what Lin Qingyu meant. “You aren’t the only imperial physician attending to the emperor,” he reminded Lin Qingyu. “And the others are skilled at what they do too.”

“If I wanted to assassinate the emperor, I’d never tamper with his medicine,” Lin Qingyu said.

Gu Fuzhou thought back to what Lin Qingyu had been studying recently. “You plan to use gu?”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Chu Zhengde only has rudimentary knowledge of gu. If we plant a rare species of gu into the emperor’s body, Chu Zhengde might not notice its presence.”

Gu Fuzhou considered that for a while. “I still think that Xiao Cheng is the key.”

“How come?”

“If he’s unfit to be crown prince, he’ll be stripped of his title whether you plant gu in the emperor or not.”

Chapter 76

GU FUZHOU MEANT THAT he planned to manipulate the emperor into stripping Xiao Cheng of the title of crown prince. However, this was easier said than done. Even a few decades into his reign, the emperor had refused to appoint any of his sons as crown prince. One could say that he was being cautious, but he'd merely approached the issue as one reared gu—he'd turned a blind eye to the power struggle between his sons, awaiting the sole survivor.

Four years ago, Xiao Cheng emerged victorious among all the princes, proving to the emperor that he would be the best crown prince. In the course of the battle for the throne, the other princes had ended up dead or incapacitated; only a hapless fool and a simpleton remained. And the price the royal family had paid was simply too huge for them to reenact the process, at least for the time being. Even if Xiao Cheng had neglected his imperial duties as of late, and even if Xiao Jie had gotten some impressive political achievements under his belt, the emperor wouldn't name a different son crown prince.

There was only one situation that could change this: Xiao Cheng doing something that the emperor absolutely couldn't tolerate. If the current crown prince engaged in illicit relations with consorts and concubines from the Inner Palace, the emperor might still take measures to ensure he retained his title. Only an egregious crime such as regicide, treason, or collusion with the enemy would cause him to be ousted from his position.

When Gu Fuzhou said this, Lin Qingyu voiced his doubts. Although Xiao Cheng had now devoted himself to searching for Shen Huaishi, that hadn't fully obscured his reason; it merely impeded his acuity enough to turn him into an ordinary man. He was still aware that the throne would be his so long as he didn't make any serious mistakes, so why would he attempt any of those crimes?

Gu Fuzhou's response was: "Do you remember the three pairs of names I wrote down?"

“I do,” Lin Qingyu said. “Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi, Xiao Jie and Xi Rong, Xiao Li and the empress.”

“For each pair, they’re each other’s weakness. If we want to manipulate someone, the best approach lies in the other person. We can apply that rule to the entirety of *Huai’s Revenge on the Monarch*,” Gu Fuzhou explained. “With that ground rule established, it’s easy to figure out one thing: If we want Xiao Cheng to do something crazy, we’ll have to target Shen Huaishi.”

“You’re right,” Lin Qingyu said pensively. “Still, no one knows of Shen Huaishi’s whereabouts.”

“No rush,” Gu Fuzhou said calmly. “Give me the time of a song,[9] and I’ll think of something.”

“You overestimate yourself,” Lin Qingyu scoffed. Brilliant as Gu Fuzhou was, he could never come up with a comprehensive plan in such a short span of time.

He thought that it’d take Gu Fuzhou a few days to come up with a response, but right after they got out of the carriage, the general asked, “Didn’t you tell Xiao Cheng that Shen Huaishi might’ve escaped to the North Kingdom?”

Lin Qingyu hummed in confirmation.

The North Kingdom, located in northernmost Great Yu, was ruled by the only king in the empire. He wasn’t from the royal family, and prior to his political marriage to Princess Jingchun, the imperial court had considered him a massive threat. Even now, the emperor took various precautionary measures against him.

Since Lin Qingyu had led Xiao Cheng to assume that Shen Huaishi might be in the North Kingdom, the crown prince would naturally send men there in search of him. Xiao Cheng could claim that he was sending group after group of his most trusted men into the North Kingdom to apprehend an assassin, but when the emperor noticed the frequency of the expeditions, as well as the effort put into them, he was sure to express dissatisfaction and even develop suspicions.

Lin Qingyu had given Xiao Cheng this lead to plant a seed of doubt in the emperor’s heart, but he wasn’t certain that seed would end up

sprouting.

With that in mind, Lin Qingyu could guess the gist of what Gu Fuzhou was thinking. “You want to use the North Kingdom to your advantage? But the kingdom and the capital have worked together closely ever since the North King married Princess Jingchun. The North King won’t rebel for the moment; he has no reason to.”

“Summon Zhang Shiquan later,” Gu Fuzhou responded. “I have a task for him.”

After Lin Qingyu had used the records he’d discovered of Lady Liang’s involvement in a private salt business to threaten the marquess of Nan’an into compliance, Zhang Shiquan—who had been directly involved in scrounging up those records—could no longer work for the marquess’s household. The steward was thorough in his duties, dependable, and loyal, so Lin Qingyu had hired him to work in the general’s residence as his personal accountant.

“What is it?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“I’ll have him recruit a dependable group in the North Kingdom to spread a rumor and a truth.”

“What rumor, and what truth?”

“The rumor will be that the North King has gathered enough troops to establish his authority as Great Yu’s supreme ruler, and that he’s plotting to seize the throne. That he aims to command an expedition heading southward, straight for the capital.”

“That rumor will be nothing but a rumor in the end,” Lin Qingyu said in disapproval. “Even if it reaches the emperor, he’ll only be slightly suspicious at worst.”

“Come on,” Gu Fuzhou said petulantly. “Before you comment on my idea, listen to the truth I had in mind.”

Lin Qingyu tried to be patient. “Spit it out, then.”

Gu Fuzhou grinned like a spectator eagerly awaiting drama. “The truth is this: The North King is staging this rebellion because Princess Jingchun, the wife the imperial court of Great Yu bestowed upon him four years ago, is a man.”

Lin Qingyu was astounded. “What?!”

The aloof beauty made no attempt to conceal his shock. It was adorable in a way Gu Fuzhou usually never got to see. Lin Qingyu’s eyes—rippling pools of autumn water—had widened; his lips, red without any rouge, had parted slightly. Gu Fuzhou wanted to kiss him.

“When Jingchun entered the palace as a boy, he was mistaken for a palace maid. Thanks to Xiao Cheng’s protection, his identity was never revealed. Only Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi—and, of course, the many readers of *Huai’s Revenge on the Monarch*—know his secret,” Gu Fuzhou said slowly, as though recounting a story. “When the North King fell in love with him and wanted to take him as his wife, Jingchun resisted desperately because he was afraid that it would expose his identity and lead to his death.”

Lin Qingyu had never heard anything so ridiculous. “A palace maid was actually male? How could such a secret be kept for so long? Was everyone else in the palace stupid?”

Gu Fuzhou shrugged. “Well, it was necessary for plot development.”

Lin Qingyu was still in total disbelief. “The North King should’ve learned about this ages ago. Why hasn’t there been any sign that he knows?”

“Following the novel’s timeline, he should know already; he found out during their second year of marriage. But by that time, he’d already fallen in love with Jingchun—quite ardently at that. What could he even do? Of course he’d choose to forgive Jingchun. The North King also hasn’t told anyone else for the sake of keeping the peace. And Jingchun still goes around dressed as a woman.”

“It took two years?” Lin Qingyu couldn’t help but ask. “Didn’t they consummate their marriage on the very night of their wedding?”

“Who says that a marriage has to be consummated? *We’ve* gotten married twice, but we haven’t consummated our marriage, have we?” Gu Fuzhou commented resentfully. “The North King is an upstanding gentleman who wouldn’t force Jingchun to have sex when there was no love between them.”

Having heard Gu Fuzhou's explanation, Lin Qingyu found the rumor that Gu Fuzhou wanted to spread somewhat plausible. The secret male identity of Princess Jingchun, who had been married off to establish peaceful relations between the North Kingdom and the empire, could indeed explain why the North King would plot a rebellion. Even if he didn't plan to do so, the imperial court would assume he intended to after learning that Princess Jingchun was male. This way, they could use the seed of doubt Lin Qingyu had buried in the emperor's heart to its highest potential.

After a long, contemplative silence, Lin Qingyu asked, "Why wait until now to tell me about this, since you knew about it long ago?"

Gu Fuzhou, who didn't think he'd done anything wrong, now nonchalantly explained himself with a lofty saying. "As they say, good things come to those who wait. Important information like this should be revealed at an opportune time—it's more fun that way. It makes you feel enlightened after having doubted everything in your life; you feel like you have a bright future ahead. And you don't know how adorable you just looked." Gu Fuzhou savored the memory again and again. "I suppose I'll only get to see that expression once in my life."

Lin Qingyu was speechless.

"Also, who says that no one knows Shen Huaishi's whereabouts?" Gu Fuzhou smirked. "I do. The book mentioned where Shen Huaishi went when he left the capital. Our intervention might've changed the plot, but we should be able to find some clues to his whereabouts if we begin a search following the route the novel describes."

Lin Qingyu let out a mocking laugh. "You think you're so awesome, don't you? Should I give you an award?"

Realizing that something was amiss, Gu Fuzhou blinked. "Huh?"

Gu Fuzhou hadn't only withheld crucial information from Lin Qingyu, he'd also put on that affected act. Lin Qingyu was so mad that he wanted to poison his husband; he couldn't bear to, though, so he decided to give Gu Fuzhou the cold shoulder instead.

Acutely aware of his mistake, Gu Fuzhou begged Lin Qingyu's forgiveness, kneeling in front of their bed for the whole night. Then he dutifully reported everything he remembered from the plot of *Huai's*

Revenge on the Monarch to Lin Qingyu. He even went the extra mile by including details from Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi's first time in bed together after they mended their relationship.

As he recounted all that with excitement, Lin Qingyu interrupted coldly, "Why do you remember *these* details so clearly?"

Gu Fuzhou sighed, his face a picture of innocence. "I didn't want to, but the author wrote everything in so much detail. It was so outrageous that it traumatized me. You have to understand that, as a seventeen-year-old, I didn't know much about how two men could have sex. But then the author included several thousand words describing how Xiao Cheng found a jade dildo of the highest quality and used it *and* his own penis to penetrate Shen Huaishi at the *same time*. My face looked like this—" Gu Fuzhou picked up a book, then scrunched his face up, vividly reenacting his expression when he first read the novel. "I was like, 'Can you *really* do that? You're kidding me, right?'"

Lin Qingyu's temple twitched. "That's enough. Shut up."

Later, Lin Qingyu sent Zhang Shiquan to the North Kingdom. Meanwhile, Gu Fuzhou chose several capable guards from his residence and had them go searching for Shen Huaishi along a route he'd laid out.

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In a flash, it was already the fourteenth day of the year, and the next day was the Lantern Festival.

In the capital, the Lantern Festival was always the busiest day of the year. Residents of the city were usually forbidden to leave the house after nightfall, but that curfew would be temporarily lifted for the Lantern Festival.

Despite having spent two years in Great Yu, Gu Fuzhou hadn't yet celebrated the festival. "I heard that the Lantern Festival is like a night of revelry for people here. Is that true?"

"Revelry?" Lin Qingyu repeated with a faint smile. "That sounds about right."

During the Lantern Festival, Great Yu's citizens enjoyed viewing lanterns, and they participated in a nighttime parade. The capital was a sea of lights that night; festivalgoers watched performances and tried to solve riddles written on lanterns, and groups of women and girls strolled around together. The full moon hanging high up in the sky and the drooping willow trees alike witnessed romances blossoming. The Lantern Festival was the only day of the year when ladies from wealthy families could come out to meet the men they liked.

That last part surprised Gu Fuzhou. "Really? I thought you folks in Great Yu didn't have relationships with each other before marriage, and that your parents decided who you marry."

That reminded Lin Qingyu of something. "How do you mean 'relationship' in this case?"

"Large cargo ships sailing on a canal are often fastened to a smaller boat that pulls them forward. Close to shore, it's tougher for these big ships to dock, because they sit deeper in the water. But the cargo aboard those ships can be unloaded onto the smaller boats, then transferred to shore. From that, you can see how the ships and boats rely on each other," Gu Fuzhou explained, patiently telling him a story about how the turn of phrase had come to be. "In my hometown, when you say you're 'in a relationship' with someone, that means you and your lover rely on each other, and you're inseparable, just like those ships. In the words of you Great Yu people, it means something along the lines of 'I want to grow old together holding hands.'"

"In that case, does being in a relationship mean pledging your love to each other?" Lin Qingyu asked slowly.

"You could say that."

Lin Qingyu looked meaningfully at him. "I see."

Chapter 77

THE FIFTEENTH DAY of the first month was slightly chilly, like all winter days, but with pleasant sunshine. There was still some time before that night's lantern-lit market, but the shops on Yongxing Street had already hung banners high in front of their doors and suspended lanterns from beneath the eaves. Elaborate lanterns of various designs dangled from the wooden beams. During the day, they didn't look like much. But they'd be illuminated at once when night fell and everyone poured into the streets, glowing brightly alongside the colorful banners in a spectacular display.

While the city was bustling with cheer, it was also heavily guarded. The Iron Cavalry, for instance, worked themselves to the bone to prepare for the Lantern Festival. Although Gu Fuzhou didn't need to *do* much, the great general still had to show his face now and then. Today, he struggled out of bed early in the morning and, after breakfast, headed to the barracks.

Lin Qingyu didn't need to enter the palace today. He wasn't planning to head to the Imperial Academy of Medicine either—he'd given himself a day off from his duties.

At noon, Hualu waited on Lin Qingyu as he ate his lunch. Ladling a bowl of milk-white fish soup for him, she asked expectantly, "Will you go to the lantern parade tonight, Young Master?"

Lin Qingyu preferred quieter environments, and the streets were always crowded during the lantern parade. Although he'd grown up in the capital, he could count the number of times he'd attended the parade on one hand, and all of them had been before he came of age. "Do *you* want to go?"

Hualu nodded excitedly. "I last went a few years ago. I still remember the huge crowds on the streets and all the lotus lamps floating down Jinshui River. But I haven't been since I was sent to the marquess of Nan'an's residence as a servant for the young marquess…" Realizing she'd misspoken, Hualu quickly piped down.

Lin Qingyu drank some soup. “You should give some thought to what you’ll wear tonight, then.”

Hualu’s eyes lit up. “Are you taking me there, Young Master?”

“Mm.” Lin Qingyu looked at the young woman, whose face was alight with joy. “Go get ready.”

Since Gu Fuzhou had asked him lots of questions about the customs around the Lantern Festival, Lin Qingyu figured Gu Fuzhou planned to join the festivities at Yongxing Street. He knew that Gu Fuzhou always wanted to look cool, so he’d told the servants to press several sets of newly tailored robes for him to choose between.

Gu Fuzhou only came back to the residence after sunset. Notified of his return, Lin Qingyu came over only to see Gu Fuzhou sprawled on the bed like a salted fish drying out under the sun.

Lin Qingyu was more than familiar with him in this state. “Tired?”

“Water…water…” Gu Fuzhou mumbled weakly.

Although Lin Qingyu knew that Gu Fuzhou was being dramatic again, he nonetheless poured a cup of tea and held it to his lips. Gu Fuzhou downed it in one gulp, asking, “Can you believe I didn’t slack off for even a moment today?”

“Why not?”

“The defenses they’d set up in the capital were full of holes. I couldn’t just shrug that off, so I gave them some advice. After that, Marquess Wu’s men kept pestering me and refused to let me leave. I could’ve come back and had lunch with you.” Gu Fuzhou seemed full of regret.

“I gather that you’re too tired to attend the lantern parade now,” Lin Qingyu said.

Gu Fuzhou was actually quite interested in the parade, but he knew that Lin Qingyu didn’t like crowds. “Yeah. There are so many people outside, and walking around that area would be *so* exhausting. I can lie in bed and imagine that I left the house for the lantern parade instead.”

“Sure, you can do that at home,” Lin Qingyu said. “And I’ll take Huantong and Hualu out to look at the lanterns.”

“Hm?” Gu Fuzhou propped himself on his elbow. “*You’re* going?”

“I promised Hualu I’d take her,” Lin Qingyu replied.

“Ohhh,” Gu Fuzhou said, drawing out the sound. “I’ll go with you guys, then.”

Lin Qingyu raised a brow. “It doesn’t sound as tiring anymore?”

Gu Fuzhou sighed. “What can I do? My wife wants to stroll through the streets, so however tired I am, I have to go with him—and I have to do so gladly.”

When it was almost time, they changed into their outfits for the evening. Lin Qingyu put up his hair and put on a jade headdress, then dressed in a set of white robes, which he paired with a hooded snow cloak. Noticing that Gu Fuzhou was still clad in formfitting combat robes, he couldn’t help but ask, “Don’t you prefer to wear red?”

When Gu Fuzhou was still Lu Wancheng, he had been partial to exquisite brocade robes, and his noble aura had paired best with a fiery red hue. Gu Fuzhou, however, more often wore dark colors. When he wasn’t smiling, his gaze looked even sharper and his expression more aloof.

“Lu Wancheng was young, so he looked good in red,” Gu Fuzhou chuckled. “But I’m too old for such a vibrant color. The most important thing about what you wear is that it suits you.” Then he proceeded to reminisce. “My original body was still better—there was no way I could look ugly, no matter what I wore.”

Lin Qingyu scoffed, disdainful.

Gu Fuzhou gathered that Lin Qingyu didn’t believe him. “It’s true. You could have given me a rag, and I’d have made it work.”

“I’ve seen your original body,” Lin Qingyu reminded him. Then, as revenge for Gu Fuzhou’s refusal to disclose his identity, he deliberately added, “The only thing I can say is that it wasn’t my type.”

Gu Fuzhou wasn’t fooled. “No? Who told me in my dream that I looked better than Lu Wancheng?”

“You,” Lin Qingyu replied coolly.

They left the house with Hualu and Huantong. There was still some time until nightfall, but the city was already bustling and abuzz with noise. It wasn’t just commoners strolling through the streets, but the wealthy and noble as well—men, women, children, the elderly, and even a fair number of foreigners.

When night truly descended upon the city, ten thousand lanterns lit up at once, casting a crimson glow on the faces of passersby. They were so bright that the women didn’t even need rouge.

Their group of four walked through the streets, passing countless stalls with vendors loudly peddling their goods. Huantong and Hualu, both eager and excitable, stuffed their bellies full of snacks in less than an hour.

In the middle of feasting, Huantong suddenly pointed up at the sky. “Young Master, General, look!”

Hundreds—no, thousands—of paper sky lanterns rose slowly into the heavens, illuminating the night as they floated toward Changsheng Temple. Hualu looked up, the sky full of lanterns reflected in her gaze. “They’re so pretty…”

“Watching from here, I feel as though something’s lacking,” Gu Fuzhou said. “Qingyu, if we want to enjoy the full moon, where’s the best spot in the capital?”

Lin Qingyu considered that for a while. “Atop the palace’s gate tower, I think.”

One could only ascend the tower from inside the palace, so Gu Fuzhou had no choice but to do away with that plan. They weren’t far from the palace, though, and Gu Fuzhou was taller than most of those on the streets. His gaze traveled past the sea of people to a lone figure on the tower whose four-clawed-dragon robes fluttered in the wind.

On the Lantern Festival, a day when the streets were full of festive cheer, what would that figure have on his mind?

Gu Fuzhou looked away. Suddenly, something collided with him, and he looked down to see a young girl holding a basket of flowers. After bumping into his solid body, she would’ve fallen over if he hadn’t steadied her quickly.

The basket tumbled to the ground, flowers flattening under the paradegoers' feet. The girl pursed her lips as though she was about to cry. Lin Qingyu motioned to Hualu to cheer her up, but Gu Fuzhou crouched down and began doing so easily, a smile on his face. It was then that the girl's mother came searching—it turned out they had both been selling flowers on the street.

Gu Fuzhou bought every flower the woman had, then turned back and said, "Qingyu, these are for you."

Before Lin Qingyu could even register what was happening, his arms were stuffed with a large bouquet. "Why give me flowers?"

The flowers, although they were as vibrant and dazzling as rich brocade, still couldn't hold a candle to Lin Qingyu's beauty.

Gu Fuzhou gazed at his wife, light pooling in his eyes. "'Nothing in Jiangnan can express my feelings, so I can only give you spring in the form of a flower in bloom.'[10] Ah—thank heavens I've memorized lots of poetry, or I couldn't keep a single conversation going with you."

Lin Qingyu bent to sniff the flowers. "You needn't do that. Just talk as you're used to talking. Even if you use the dialect from your hometown, I can understand you."

"Oh. In that case, I gave you flowers because—"

Just then, a line of carriages rolled forward leisurely, leaving almost no space in the street. Inside the carriages, women danced gracefully; delicate gauze veiled their faces, and fragrance wafted from the sleeves of their robes. The sight attracted the gazes of many of those nearby, and in the blink of an eye, a flurry of spectators separated the quartet from Gu Fuzhou's residence. Lin Qingyu and Huantong were still together, but the other two had vanished.

Lin Qingyu wasn't that worried. Gu Fuzhou was tall, so it wasn't too hard to find him. Even if he didn't manage to, he could always head back to their carriage and wait for Gu Fuzhou there.

The huge bouquet was cumbersome, so he passed it to Huantong and had him carry it to the carriage. Then Lin Qingyu weaved through the crowd alone, enjoying the glowing lanterns as he sought Gu Fuzhou.

The lanterns shone just as brightly as before. Gazing at the unvarying scenery, Lin Qingyu found himself getting bored. Before long, he stopped surveying the lanterns and focused on searching for Gu Fuzhou. There were simply too many people here, however. Lin Qingyu stood amid the jostling crowd, one face after another whipping past his sight, yet none belonged to the person he was looking for.

Unprovoked desperation rose in Lin Qingyu. He was considering going back to their carriage when someone called his name.

“Qingyu.”

Turning toward the direction of that voice, Lin Qingyu saw Gu Fuzhou standing by the Jinshui River under a tree laden with bright red lanterns. He met Lin Qingyu’s gaze, his eyes shining brightly with deep affection.

This man…liked him. Gu Fuzhou liked him.

Warmth suffused Lin Qingyu’s chest as his heart quickened, thudding like a drumbeat. He wasn’t suffering palpitations; his heart was only beating this fast because of a certain person.

Despite himself, he took a stride forward, then another, weaving through the teeming sea of people. When he had almost reached that person’s side, he was yet again jostled forward, and he stumbled.

Just like that, he ended up in Gu Fuzhou’s arms.

Gu Fuzhou’s hands hovered over his waist. “Why were you running, Physician Lin?” he asked, smiling.

Lin Qingyu froze. Had he run there? He hadn’t even realized.

He couldn’t help but smile as well. “I was coming to see you, so of course I ran to you.”

It was Gu Fuzhou’s turn to be stunned. His grasp on the waist of the man in his arms was no longer tentative.

Just then, Hualu’s voice traveled over. “Have you found Young Master, General?”

“Yes—found him.” Gu Fuzhou let Lin Qingyu go, then asked as though nothing had happened, “Where’s Huantong?”

“I told him to head back to the carriage,” Lin Qingyu replied.

Gu Fuzhou sent Hualu to inform Huantong that they’d reunited in case Huantong was worried. When he did, only he and Lin Qingyu were left.

Their gazes locked for a while; both men seemed to feel awkward. In the end, Gu Fuzhou spoke first. “Want to take a walk by the river, Qingyu?”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Sure.”

The moon hung high in the sky, casting a luminous radiance onto the countless ships docked by the river. Decorated by floating lotus lamps, the surface of the water now resembled a galaxy in the sky. Despite how chatty he usually was, Gu Fuzhou was completely silent. Lin Qingyu walked by his side, also tongue-tied.

Conversation had flowed so naturally when they left the house; why were things so awkward now?

After who knew how long, Gu Fuzhou cleared his throat and recited, “‘The rising moon shines with such radiance; O, how lovely this beautiful lady is…’”

Lin Qingyu had halted in his tracks the moment Gu Fuzhou opened his mouth.

“‘She moves with such grace and elegance; longing fills my worried heart…’”[11] Gu Fuzhou paused, frowning. “Uh, what’s the next line again?”

Shit. He’d forgotten.

The flower lamps shone as bright as day while melodious flute song and the crowd’s merry chatter filled the air. Lin Qingyu held his husband’s gaze quietly; his long lashes didn’t conceal the glistening sheen in his eyes. The view and scenery around him seemed to blur.

A long time later, Gu Fuzhou bowed his head, letting out a soft laugh —perhaps in self-deprecation or to calm his nerves. “Sorry, Qingyu. The *Book of Odes* is so hard to remember. I only memorized a few poems over one class period, and I’ve forgotten most of them. Can I recite another poem for you instead? Uh… ‘The mountains bear trees on which branches grow…’”[12]

“I have a crush on you too,” Lin Qingyu said, using Gu Fuzhou’s dialect. “Want to be in a relationship with me?”

Chapter 78

WHEN THEY RETURNED to the carriage an hour later, Huantong and Hualu were sitting outside it shoulder to shoulder. Huantong was pointing at the fireworks blooming in the skies, cheering excitedly; Hualu watched the beautiful scene quietly, cradling her head in her hands. While she was enjoying the view, she couldn't help thinking that it would be nice if Young Marquess Lu could see the bustling streets of the Lantern Festival from up in the heavens.

Compared to the quiet Hualu, the excitable Huantong seemed less composed. Although he was only a year younger than Lin Qingyu—which made him almost of age—he still had a simple mind and a young boy's disposition. Gu Fuzhou, who was now inwardly the same age as Huantong, seemed frivolous most of the time, but he never did things halfway when it was time to be serious.

Like now, for instance. The couple had just confessed their love for each other, but Gu Fuzhou didn't quite seem excited; he was quiet most of the way back. If Lin Qingyu hadn't heard Gu Fuzhou's answer clearly, he'd think that he'd gravely misunderstood—that maybe Gu Fuzhou *didn't* like him that much.

Lin Qingyu quickly negated that thought. He wasn't blind; he'd seen every single detail of what Gu Fuzhou had done during their time together. He wasn't stupid either. *The mountains bear trees on which branches grow; my heart sings for you, and yet you don't know.* Gu Fuzhou had willingly taken poison just to return to Lin Qingyu's side. He'd also insisted on seeing him off to work, however sleepy he was. He'd even crawled out of bed to pour Lin Qingyu tea in the early morning during winter. If what Gu Fuzhou felt for him couldn't be called love, then love didn't exist in this world.

So why was Gu Fuzhou so quiet?

Seeing the pair, the driver greeted them. "General, Lady, you're here. Are we going back to the residence?"

Lin Qingyu gave Gu Fuzhou a look. A brief pause later, Gu Fuzhou opened his mouth. “Oh… Sure.”

At that point, Lin Qingyu realized vaguely what was going on with him, and it made him laugh inwardly. He got into the carriage first.

The moment Lin Qingyu’s faint scent of herbs drifted away, Gu Fuzhou regained his senses. He immediately grabbed Huantong, demanding hurriedly, “How do I look?”

“How do you look?” Huantong repeated dubiously. “About the same as always, General.”

“But I feel like an idiot,” Gu Fuzhou lamented. “An idiot who can’t even walk.”

Hualu studied Gu Fuzhou carefully. “Now that you mention it, General, you look much more stiff than usual.”

Gu Fuzhou straightened; now he looked even stiffer.

At that moment, the carriage driver dealt the fatal blow: “You did seem to have two left feet as you walked up with your wife, General.”

Gu Fuzhou was speechless.

Lin Qingyu’s voice came from inside the carriage. “What are you waiting for?”

Gu Fuzhou took a deep breath. “I’m coming!”

The moment he got into the carriage, the noise outside became a blur. Then he shut the door, and everything in the world aside from that small space disappeared. Once Gu Fuzhou had sat down beside Lin Qingyu, the driver spurred the horse forward with a shout, and the carriage began driving down the road.

Lin Qingyu’s scent enveloped Gu Fuzhou once again. Gu Fuzhou gulped. “Qingyu.”

Lin Qingyu looked down at his hands in his lap. “Hm?”

“I said that I wanted to be in a relationship with you. Did you hear me?”

“I did.”

“You really heard me, right?” Gu Fuzhou was still worried, and he wanted to be sure. “I said…”

“You said, ‘I want that. I want that. I’ve liked you for so long. I already liked you when I read the book, and when you died, I cursed the author to hell and back. For you, I’m willing to wake up early and get into fights. No matter where you want to go, I’ll come with you. I’ll give you all the money I earn. I’ll protect you from harm, and even if you wake me up in the middle of the night, I won’t be mad at you. I like waiting for you, I like watching you use poison, I like listening to you talk. I want you to be happy forever… I like you, and I want to be with you.’” Lin Qingyu had recited what Gu Fuzhou said to him, not missing a single word. “I heard everything.”

Gu Fuzhou gaped, shocked. In utter disbelief, he demanded, “Wait—was my confession really that unintelligible and nonsensical? Why would I have followed ‘protect you from harm’ with ‘won’t get mad at you’? Are those two things even connected?”

Lin Qingyu looked up from beneath his lashes. “You’ll have to ask yourself that,” he said, trying not to laugh.

Gu Fuzhou gazed down, saying gloomily, “That wasn’t smooth at all, was it?”

Lin Qingyu was always ready to learn more of Gu Fuzhou’s hometown dialect. “Does ‘smooth’ mean ‘cool’?”

Gu Fuzhou nodded. He was still mad at himself. Heaving a resentful sigh, he began, “I wanted to look effortless and unbothered as I chatted happily with you. That would’ve been way cooler. I’d already planned everything: I was going to express my feelings for you through poetry, put on a show of being refined, then tell a joke to clear the awkwardness in the air. That was my first time confessing to someone, though—I don’t have much experience at it. I was so fucking nervous.” Gu Fuzhou chuckled, then continued in his deep voice, “Don’t be annoyed with me, Qingyu. I’ll try to be smoother next time, so that I don’t embarrass you. And if you think that my confession was too messy, I can redo it. You’ve got to give me some time to prepare, though…”

“No need.” Lin Qingyu’s lips curved in a smile. “You were perfectly fine just now. You were cool, and I liked it.”

After a moment, Gu Fuzhou asked dazedly, “Does this mean you’re mine now?”

His cheeks slightly flushed, Lin Qingyu held Gu Fuzhou’s hand, which had been hovering awkwardly in the air. “Yes. I’m yours now.”

At that moment, a tremorous feeling traveled all over Gu Fuzhou’s body, numbing his heart, his limbs, every inch of him—and Lin Qingyu had only held his hand.

They’d held hands before, even embraced and slept in the same bed. Still, Gu Fuzhou had never burned up at a single touch like this. Was this what it would feel like to be with someone he liked? It was a little… addictive.

They only reached the general’s residence after midnight. It was very late, and they were all tired.

Having washed up, Gu Fuzhou stood in front of the bunk bed, hesitating. *Would it be too hasty to share a bed the same day we pledged our love to each other?* Tentatively, he asked, “I’ll sleep on the top bunk as usual, then, Qingyu?”

After a pause, Lin Qingyu nodded. “Sure.”

After Gu Fuzhou had climbed up to the bed, Lin Qingyu blew out the candle, and darkness fell over the room. The clear moonlight blended with the glow of the lantern hanging under the eaves and spilled in the edge of the window.

Although Lin Qingyu was exhausted, he couldn’t sleep. There wasn’t much movement on the top bunk, and when Lin Qingyu thought that Gu Fuzhou might already be fast asleep up there, sleep evaded him even more decisively.

The realization that his feelings were requited was, unexpectedly, making him toss and turn in bed like a lovesick young woman. Love wasn’t to be underestimated after all.

Only when the sun was almost up did Lin Qingyu drift into sleep. In his dreams, he heard someone call for the general. He opened his eyes and saw that it was Huantong, there to rouse Gu Fuzhou.

Usually, it was Lin Qingyu who woke Gu Fuzhou. Even he had slept late today, though, so only Huantong could take up the task. Huantong had pitched his voice low to avoid waking his young master, but he'd unwittingly done just that while the general remained fast asleep.

Lin Qingyu sat up in bed. "Get the general's court robes ready. I'll wake him."

When Lin Qingyu unearthed Gu Fuzhou from his blankets, Gu Fuzhou descended the bunk-bed ladder with a yawn. When he noticed Lin Qingyu's wan look, however, his drowsiness immediately dissipated. "Did you not sleep well last night, Qingyu?"

"Mm-mm."

Gu Fuzhou gazed down on Lin Qingyu, who was helping him put on his court robes. "Why not?"

Lin Qingyu looked at him archly. "Why do you think?"

"So it turns out that I wasn't the only one who was flustered." Gu Fuzhou had seemingly reverted to normal overnight. With the corners of his lips upturned in a grin, he continued, "You seemed so calm, Physician Lin, as if you weren't affected in the slightest. I didn't think that us pledging our love to each other meant too much to you."

Lin Qingyu's cheeks heated up. He couldn't help retorting, "You were right. I wasn't *that* flustered."

Gu Fuzhou didn't believe that at all. A grin stretched across his face. "You *still* refuse to admit that you were flustered, even though it kept you awake."

"You're that happy to see that I lost sleep?" Lin Qingyu said flatly.

"To be honest, I am a bit," Gu Fuzhou admitted. "But this'll be the last time you lose sleep because of me. From now on, you should sleep well."

"Of course."

Once Gu Fuzhou was all dressed, Lin Qingyu saw him off as usual. Before getting into the carriage, Gu Fuzhou suddenly asked, "What do you Great Yu folk usually do after you pledge your love to each other? Can you finally make merry and seek pleasure without a care in the world?"

“No,” Lin Qingyu said mildly. “It’s customary in Great Yu to keep abiding by proper etiquette, even after pledging one’s love. Even if your emotions come from the heart, your actions must still follow proper etiquette. You can enjoy your pleasures, but not engage in debauchery.”

Gu Fuzhou’s smile faded. “Pretend I didn’t ask.”

“Get in the carriage, quick, so that you won’t be late for morning court,” Lin Qingyu told him, amused.

Gu Fuzhou didn’t move. “Wait,” he began slowly. “The rules you mentioned are for citizens of Great Yu who have pledged their love but not yet married. Since we’re already married, why should we ‘follow proper etiquette’ and ‘enjoy our pleasures’ without ‘engaging in debauchery,’ despite our emotions coming ‘from the heart’?”

“What do you have in mind?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Gu Fuzhou laughed. “If Great Yu’s custom isn’t applicable to us, we should follow my hometown’s rules instead.”

Then Gu Fuzhou bent down and gently touched his lips to Lin Qingyu’s forehead. Just a light peck, like a dragonfly skimming over water.

Lin Qingyu felt the touch of warmth on his forehead. Before it truly made itself known, Gu Fuzhou’s scent—which had enveloped him just a moment earlier—had dissipated.

Straightening up, Gu Fuzhou saw how calm and collected Lin Qingyu looked, as though the gesture had merely been a puff of wind in his face.

But then Lin Qingyu’s fair cheeks reddened rapidly, his long lashes fluttering.

Gu Fuzhou’s heart melted. Smiling, the general said, “As I’d expect of you, Physician Lin, you’re calm and collected after a kiss—unlike me. I feel like my heart’s leaping into my throat.”

Lin Qingyu took a moment to calm himself. “That’s because you’re so weak.”

Was it customary in Gu Fuzhou’s hometown for a husband to kiss his wife on the forehead after they pledged their love to each other and married—and to do nothing else? He’d thought that there’d be more, but he had the

wrong idea. Apparently, people in Gu Fuzhou's hometown were also reserved, with few desires.

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A short time after the New Year's festivities ended, Lin Qingyu received a message that Zhang Shiquan had sent from the North Kingdom: He'd already done what Lin Qingyu had asked of him.

Rumors that the queen of the North Kingdom was a man, and that the North King had been furious upon discovering the truth, spread like wildfire in the kingdom. They eventually reached the Tianji Guard's spies, who were in the North Kingdom searching for Shen Huaishi under Xiao Cheng's orders. The spies hastened back to the capital so that they could inform the emperor of the matter.

Lin Qingyu had no way to know how the Tianji Guard informed the emperor of the rumors, nor to know his reaction. He knew only that the emperor had flown into a rage, triggering a recurrence of his migraines so serious that he was now bedridden. Even so, the emperor had summoned the empress and reproached her, then called his most trusted officials to his bedside for an overnight meeting to discuss what was going on in the North Kingdom.

The war in the northwest was still ongoing; thus, the imperial coffers had long been empty. If the North Kingdom rebelled at this point, the imperial court would be forced into a corner by two adversaries. But how were they supposed to deal with this situation when they were out of both resources and soldiers, and their army was leaderless? The only silver lining to this situation was that the rumors about the North Kingdom's king and queen were—for now—still unproven. The North King had delivered a missive to the emperor in greeting not long ago, and it hadn't contained anything out of the ordinary.

If a palace maid really did turn out to be male, that would surely implicate the empress, who oversaw the Inner Palace. That was what the empress was worried about when Lin Qingyu greeted her in her chambers.

“I already checked the Ministry of Etiquette’s documents from that time, and nothing about Jingchun’s identity was amiss. But while this may just be a rumor, it has already enraged the emperor. He has come to accuse me of laxity in monitoring the Inner Palace…” The empress shut her eyes, heaving a huge sigh. “And I don’t have any way to defend myself.”

Gu Fuzhou had said that Jingchun was only able to fool everyone thanks to Xiao Cheng’s protection over the years. Given how thorough Xiao Cheng was, he’d naturally left no stone unturned: The head lady-in-waiting who’d made it possible for Jingchun—then a young boy—to work in the Ministry of Etiquette had died of unknown causes the moment she left the palace for good.

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” Lin Qingyu said. “If rumors regarding Princess Jingchun have spread in the North Kingdom, there may really be something amiss regarding her identity. Perhaps the North King hasn’t acted yet for fear of alerting the imperial court.”

“I’ve already ordered a thorough investigation of the matter,” the empress told him. “Jingchun entered the palace over a decade ago, and the head lady-in-waiting at the time left the palace a long time back and started a family. Searching for her will take some time.”

Aware that overt eagerness might arouse the empress’s suspicion, Lin Qingyu let the matter drop for now. “How is His Highness the sixth prince faring, Your Majesty?”

When he mentioned her son, the empress’s expression softened. “The servants previously waiting on Li-er were all incapacitated and cast out, and I’ve handpicked a new group and sent them to Jinyang Palace. Having seen how the previous servants ended up, I’m sure they know how they ought to do their job. Laifu went to visit Li-er yesterday—he said that Li-er has grown taller, and that he looks much more spirited than before.”

Lin Qingyu smiled. “That’s great.”

“That said, I find myself unable to cast my worries aside, even now,” the empress added. “There are hardly any competent imperial physicians in Jinyang Palace. If you have time, visit Li-er on my behalf.”

Lin Qingyu nodded.

When he left Fengyi Palace, it was about time for Gu Fuzhou's meeting to end, so he headed for Qinzheng Hall. The emperor had summoned Gu Fuzhou early in the morning, and they should've been close to done.

The eunuch on duty happened to be Xiaosongzi, who was confused to see Lin Qingyu. "Didn't you already take the emperor's pulse this morning, Physician Lin?"

"I'm not here for that," Lin Qingyu replied.

"Then what would it be—"

As they spoke, the meeting in Qinzheng Hall ended. The prime minister walked out of the gates first, followed by the marquess of Nan'an. The moment the marquess saw Lin Qingyu, his expression shifted slightly, and he veered away from the physician as though he felt guilty.

Gu Fuzhou was the last to leave. When he met Lin Qingyu's gaze, the corners of his lips quirked up in a grin, and he quickly strode over. "What's the occasion, my wife?"

"I was just passing by," Lin Qingyu replied. "If you're done here, General, would you like to come home with me?"

"After you, my wife," Gu Fuzhou said with all due politeness.

Xue Ying happened to see them as he sent off the other officials, and he couldn't help but exclaim, "How fortunate Great General Gu is!"

The palace wasn't a good place for Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou to talk, but after they got in their carriage, Lin Qingyu asked, "How did things go in Qinzheng Hall today?"

"It was a load of crap," Gu Fuzhou drawled. "The only thing worth noting is that Xiao Jie accumulated military provisions quite successfully. The emperor praised him, and he's getting him to help Xiao Cheng with national administrative affairs."

Lin Qingyu relayed the empress's words to Gu Fuzhou. "We don't have anything that could prove Princess Jingchun's identity, and the only other person who knew it has died. If the North King intends to keep this secret for Jingchun's sake, proving our case won't be easy."

“If we need someone to prove it, that’s easy,” Gu Fuzhou said nonchalantly. “There’s Shen Huaishi and Xiao Cheng both.”

“Shen Huaishi…” Lin Qingyu looked pensive. “Let’s hope we find him as soon as possible.”

Chapter 79

GU FUZHOU'S TRUSTED GUARDS didn't make them wait long. Half a month after their search began, they returned to the capital bearing good news.

"We followed the route the general provided, heading south until we found Shen-gongzi in a fishing village in Southern Yue," one guard reported. "We showed him your token and told him that you wanted to see him, and he agreed to meet you without much hesitation." He drew a secret missive from his lapel. "Shen-gongzi said to give you this, Lady."

Gu Fuzhou had instructed his guards to focus on searching that fishing village in Southern Yue. In the novel, Shen Huaishi had made his first friend in that village. He'd lived a simple, uneventful life with the kindhearted fishermen there, gradually leaving his past behind, until the Tianji Guard found him three years later. To hide from the Tianji Guard, who were hot on his heels, Shen Huaishi had left the fishing village and wandered the land once again. When he still didn't return to the capital, Xiao Cheng—who had already been crowned emperor—left the city and began searching for Shen Huaishi himself. He found and abducted Shen Huaishi, then brought him back to the palace and imprisoned him there.

Xiao Cheng had looked into Shen Huaishi's eyes, which were acrid with burning hatred, and said, "Hate me, then—at least I'll still be in your life. I'd rather have you hate me here until I die than bear living without you by my side."

Back in reality, Gu Fuzhou had found Shen Huaishi before the Tianji Guard, who were wasting their time in the North Kingdom. When Lin Qingyu had raised the possibility of Shen Huaishi being in the North Kingdom, Xiao Cheng hadn't really believed it; however, once "rumors" about Princess Jingchun surfaced in the kingdom, the crown prince became increasingly convinced that Shen Huaishi was there. He and Shen Huaishi had been the only people in the capital who knew that Jingchun was a man, after all.

Lin Qingyu opened the letter, which contained only a few words: *Awakening of Insects*.[13] *The same old place.*

The Awakening of Insects would be the twenty-fifth day of the first month, which was in three days. The “same old place” ought to be Changsheng Temple, since he and Shen Huaishi had met there several times.

“Good work,” Gu Fuzhou told the guard. “Go claim your reward.”

After the guard left, Gu Fuzhou observed casually, “Shen Huaishi cares a lot about you, huh? The moment he received an invitation from you, he left for the capital immediately, although he may be in great danger. It’s like he isn’t afraid of being captured by the Tianji Guard. You’re always harsh and cold toward him, so why does he still hold you in such high regard?”

Lin Qingyu held the letter over a candle until it burned to ashes. “I healed his injuries and saved him. I also told him what he thinks is the truth about the Tianyu Sect’s destruction. Though I’m always harsh toward him, that’s because I want him to see through Xiao Cheng’s disguise more quickly, and also to remind him not to debase himself. Shen Huaishi’s quite honest, so it stands to reason that he’d treat me as a friend.”

Gu Fuzhou’s fingers weaved casually through the candle flame. “If you ask me, the main factor is your beauty. If someone else attempted to reason with Shen Huaishi, they’d be lucky if he didn’t unsheathe his saber outright. But now that he’s received an invitation from such a beautiful man—of course he’ll come, even if his life is at risk.”

Lin Qingyu disagreed. “Even if Shen Huaishi has a proclivity for men, I don’t think I’m his type.”

“You fail to understand something about yourself, wife,” Gu Fuzhou remarked with a smile. “With your looks, you’re everyone’s type.”

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Three days later, Lin Qingyu headed to Changsheng Temple alongside Gu Fuzhou.

“Do you think Shen Huaishi will agree to help us?” he asked.

Gu Fuzhou didn’t even need to think about it. “No. Putting aside the matter of whether he’s still in love with Xiao Cheng, he wants to protect Jingchun. He won’t disclose the whole truth.”

“Then how can we use him to prove the truth of the rumors?” Lin Qingyu mused.

Gu Fuzhou grinned. “Call me ‘laogong,’ and I’ll help you think of something.”

A mixture of complicated emotions rose within Lin Qingyu. Even after they’d confessed their feelings to each other, Gu Fuzhou was still fixated on being an old eunuch. This, Lin Qingyu realized, was why Gu Fuzhou had only kissed his forehead after they pledged their love to each other, unwilling to take the next step.

That was fine, however. Acts of lust and desire weren’t necessary to Lin Qingyu. So long as they loved each other and could support each other until the ends of their lives, that would be enough. Nonetheless, Lin Qingyu hoped that Gu Fuzhou had said that in jest, and that he wouldn’t *really* castrate himself.

“Laogong,” Lin Qingyu uttered expressionlessly.

Dissatisfied, Gu Fuzhou teased, “Your voice is flat. You should sound softer, more pliant, when you call me that—otherwise, I don’t feel anything. Try again. You can do this.”

“See if I care,” Lin Qingyu snapped.

Noticing that the great beauty’s expression had darkened, Gu Fuzhou decided to back down before it was too late. “When you see Shen Huaishi, you don’t need to push him into telling the truth. You just need to…”

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Shen Huaishi didn’t trust anyone but Lin Qingyu, so he wouldn’t show up while Gu Fuzhou was also around. Thus, Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou split up at the front hall, and Lin Qingyu headed to the back rooms

himself. Shen Huaishi always kept his promises; he might've been tailing Lin Qingyu in the darkness at that moment, waiting for the right time to reveal himself.

Making the excuse that he wasn't feeling well, Lin Qingyu asked a monk for an empty room to rest in. After he'd waited for fifteen minutes, a suspicious gust of wind blew into the room, rustling the windows. When Lin Qingyu got up and closed them, he turned back to see a man standing across from him.

Shen Huaishi seemed a completely different man from when Lin Qingyu last saw him months ago. His physical appearance was more or less the same, save for the tan he now sported; his bearing, on the other hand, had changed drastically. Lin Qingyu had last seen him when Xiao Cheng was stabbed; after hearing the truth Lin Qingyu wanted him to know, Shen Huaishi had been despondent and listless, devoid of spirit. Now he looked at Lin Qingyu with eyes as still as pools of water, not a single ripple to be seen. His gaze seemed far away, quiet, as though years had passed since they parted.

"Guard Shen," Lin Qingyu greeted. "I hope you're well."

Shen Huaishi offered him a small smile. It seemed he hadn't smiled in a long time; the corners of his mouth moved stiffly. "Physician Lin."

Lin Qingyu would have been lying if he'd said he felt nothing when he looked at this man with his unassuming face. Despite finally settling down in Southern Yue, Shen Huaishi had returned to the capital simply because Lin Qingyu had invited him to meet there. Just as Gu Fuzhou had said, Shen Huaishi's loyalty to Lin Qingyu as a friend was truly remarkable.

After they sat down across from each other, Lin Qingyu poured tea into a cup and pushed it toward Shen Huaishi. "The journey here must've been hard."

Shen Huaishi stared at Lin Qingyu's fingers, which were slender and as fair as jade. "Physician Lin…" he murmured, "how did you think of looking for me in Southern Yue?"

"If I said it was a coincidence, would you believe me?"

After momentary hesitation, Shen Huaishi nodded.

Lin Qingyu sighed. “You believe whatever anyone says. How did you survive until now?”

Shen Huaishi froze, stunned. “Maybe I survived because I’m skilled in combat.”

Lin Qingyu chuckled. “You aren’t wrong.” This *was* one of the reasons, but the main one was that Shen Huaishi—alongside Xiao Cheng—was one of the protagonists of this world.

When Lin Qingyu smiled, brightness seemed to fill the simple, unadorned room. Looking at him, Shen Huaishi was inadvertently reminded of Jingchun. The two men’s eyes were so similar that Shen Huaishi felt close to Lin Qingyu every time he saw him. Having grown up together, Shen Huaishi and Jingchun shared an unbreakable bond. Even with Xiao Cheng between them, Shen Huaishi’s desire to protect Jingchun had never changed.

“The messenger told me that you need my help with a life-or-death matter. Is…” Shen Huaishi paused. “Is *he* making things difficult for you again?”

“Xiao Cheng no longer harbors those intentions toward me,” Lin Qingyu replied.

Shen Huaishi’s gaze had darkened when he heard Xiao Cheng’s name. “Good.”

“He’s fully devoted himself to searching for you.” Lin Qingyu observed Shen Huaishi’s expression as he spoke. “It doesn’t seem like he’ll stop until he finds you. If you’d killed him then and there with your sword, no such complications would have arisen. Pity.”

Stunned, Shen Huaishi took a few moments to speak. Then he murmured, “I was useless—unable to avenge Tianyu Sect.”

“What if I give you another chance at that?”

Shen Huaishi’s pupils dilated. After a while, he managed, “Physician Lin?”

Lin Qingyu broached the main topic. “I have a question for you: Is Jingchun a man or a woman?”

Shen Huaishi shot up from his seat, accidentally jostling the table and chairs. The teacups on the table clinked against each other. “How did you know?”

“I don’t. I’ve merely heard the rumors about Jingchun that have spread in the North Kingdom,” Lin Qingyu said. “Judging from your reaction, they must be true.”

Shen Huaishi pressed his lips together in a straight, taut line.

“But you were merely a shadow guard; you didn’t have the power to conceal Jingchun’s secret from everyone else,” Lin Qingyu continued. “So I suppose Xiao Cheng was behind this. This could be scandalous—in protecting Jingchun, Xiao Cheng is guilty of deceiving the emperor.”

“If this matter caused you to want to meet me, Physician Lin, I apologize. I cannot tell you anything,” Shen Huaishi said stiffly.

Lin Qingyu glanced archly at him from the corner of his eye. “For Xiao Cheng’s sake, or Jingchun’s?”

“After I stabbed His High…Xiao Cheng, the score between us was settled,” Shen Huaishi managed to reply hesitantly. “But Jingchun is an outsider when it comes to this affair. I mustn’t involve Jingchun in this.”

“The score was settled, you say?” Lin Qingyu’s glare sharpened. “Your family suffered a horrible death because of the Xiao family. You’re saying you can put all that behind you now that you’ve stabbed him with your sword?”

“I don’t know…” Shen Huaishi shut his eyes, looking pained. “I just want to live a peaceful life, Physician Lin. Please don’t push me.”

Lin Qingyu had expected Shen Huaishi to balk. Knowing that further efforts to convince him would be pointless, he said, “If you’re intent on putting all that behind you, who am I to prevent it? Thank you for journeying here. You can leave now.”

Shen Huaishi wanted to say something but didn’t. His hands clenched into fists, then reopened. “We’ll meet each other again someday.”

“Wait.” Lin Qingyu unfastened a jewel he wore dangling from his waist. “Take this. If you intend to meet me in the future, show this token representing me to whoever asks for it. Give me something of yours too.”

Shen Huaishi took the jewel and stowed it away carefully. After a moment of hesitation, he withdrew a thin purple belt from his lapel and handed it to Lin Qingyu. “No matter what you intend to do, Physician Lin, please don’t harm Jingchun,” he said, his expression grave.

Lin Qingyu tended not to care about anyone else so long as he could achieve his own goals. Faced with Shen Huaishi’s earnest, pleading gaze, however, he promised, “You needn’t worry. Jingchun is protected by his husband, who loves him more than his life, so nothing will happen to him. If you have the time to worry, worry about yourself. I already lured the Tianji Guard to the North Kingdom; still, you should be careful.”

Shen Huaishi clasped his hands in gratitude. “Thank you, Physician Lin.”

Another gust of wind blew, and Shen Huaishi vanished.

Gu Fuzhou was supposed to wait in the front hall, but when Lin Qingyu arrived there, the general was nowhere to be seen. After talking to a monk, Lin Qingyu learned that his husband was meditating with the imperial preceptor by the mountains behind the temple.

The last time Gu Fuzhou had come here with Lin Qingyu, he’d met Xu Junyuan. The imperial preceptor lived in seclusion throughout the year, and was seldom available to meet even the empress herself. Yet this policy of the preceptor’s seemed not to extend to Gu Fuzhou, as far back as when Gu Fuzhou was still Lu Wancheng.

Xu Junyuan was a mysterious figure who seemed to know everything and nothing at the same time. Lin Qingyu couldn’t figure him out.

When Lin Qingyu had made his way to the mountains in search of them, Gu Fuzhou and Xu Junyuan had already ended their conversation. Xu Junyuan was seeing Gu Fuzhou off. Spotting Lin Qingyu walking toward them, he raised his eyebrows in greeting. “You’re here, Lady.”

Lin Qingyu inclined his head, polite yet distant. “Imperial Preceptor.”

“We should thank the imperial preceptor properly, Qingyu,” Gu Fuzhou said.

“Why?”

“Because he’ll be doing us a small favor.”

“You flatter me, General,” Xu Junyuan said, smiling. “It’s my honor to be able to help you.”

“Don’t you feel honored when you work for His Majesty, Imperial Preceptor?” asked Lin Qingyu.

Knowing what Lin Qingyu meant, Xu Junyuan replied evenly, “How could we possibly compare the general and His Majesty?”

“You don’t need to waste your time on him,” Gu Fuzhou told Lin Qingyu. He had ample experience with Xu Junyuan. “The imperial preceptor is a man of riddles. He’ll never answer your questions directly, so your efforts will be for naught.”

Xu Junyuan couldn’t help chuckling. “You understand me well, General.”

Lin Qingyu considered that for a while. “Even so, I have a question for you, Imperial Preceptor.”

“Please go ahead, Lady.”

“Did you once say that His Highness the sixth prince is intellectually incapacitated because he lost his soul?”

“You’ve read the sixth prince’s diagnosis, Lady…? As you said, the sixth prince lost his soul as a child, so neither medicine nor acupuncture work on him.” Xu Junyuan sighed. “I wonder how much longer he can live.”

Lin Qingyu’s brow furrowed. “Explain.”

“A separation of body and soul goes against the heavens,” Xu Junyuan said. “It cannot possibly continue for long.”

Lin Qingyu’s heart abruptly sank. “If a body and soul cannot be separated for long, what happens to a soul within the wrong body?”

Gu Fuzhou looked toward Lin Qingyu. “Qingyu…” he uttered, resigned.

Xu Junyuan smiled. “I don’t have the answer to that.”

On the way back, Lin Qingyu was preoccupied, his brow creased in worry. Gu Fuzhou failed to dispel his concern, even after multiple attempts to cheer him up. When they reached the residence, dinner had already been

prepared, but Lin Qingyu didn’t have much appetite. “You can eat,” he told Gu Fuzhou. “I’ll head to the study.”

As though Gu Fuzhou would dare eat dinner by himself if Lin Qingyu skipped it. Running to the study after Lin Qingyu, he opened the door to see him staring at a book without turning any of the pages. He walked over and snatched the medical text out of Lin Qingyu’s hands.

Lin Qingyu rose and tried to retrieve the book. “Give it back.”

Gu Fuzhou promptly grabbed his hands. “Xu Junyuan was talking about Xiao Li, not me, so you shouldn’t decide to apply that scenario to my situation, Physician Lin. Didn’t he say that he couldn’t give an answer on the topic of someone’s soul waking up in someone else’s body?”

“I can’t *not* worry,” Lin Qingyu said slowly. “*Your* soul gets up to too much mischief.”

Gu Fuzhou leaned back against the table and balanced the book on his finger, spinning it. “It isn’t the time to worry about that right now. We should focus on what’s ahead of us.”

“Easy for you to say.” Lin Qingyu massaged the center of his brow. “You weren’t the one left behind.”

Gu Fuzhou fell silent.

“I know that dwelling on it is pointless, of course,” Lin Qingyu murmured. “I just…can’t help it.”

Gu Fuzhou grinned. “So, what should we do? Maybe we can divert our attention to something else?”

Lin Qingyu wasn’t unenthusiastic. “For instance…?”

“For instance…” Gu Fuzhou paused, the book stilling on his fingertip. Then he casually tossed the book onto the desk, bent down, and kissed Lin Qingyu’s slightly cool lips.

Lin Qingyu’s heart pounded abruptly. Everything—including Shen Huaishi and Xu Junyuan—disappeared from his mind when their lips touched.

Gu Fuzhou kissed him gently and passionately, but also a tad clumsily, given his inexperience. Still, his motions seemed practiced and

composed, as he’d hoped.

But Lin Qingyu’s palms, pressed to Gu Fuzhou’s chest, felt the rapid pounding of his heart beneath. And it was beating so fast—even quicker than his.

You’re quite the actor, Jiang-gongzi.

Lin Qingyu tentatively stuck his tongue out as he kissed Gu Fuzhou back.

Chapter 80

THE MOMENT ITS TIP slipped out of Lin Qingyu's lips, his tongue entwined with another. Gu Fuzhou had successfully distracted him; Lin Qingyu stopped thinking about separated souls, and souls awakening in the wrong bodies, and immersed himself in Gu Fuzhou's scent.

They kissed until Lin Qingyu's lips began to numb, his breath coming in short, rapid huffs. At his limit, he tried to push Gu Fuzhou away, only for Gu Fuzhou to cradle the back of his head with his palm while his other hand held Lin Qingyu's fingers down. His arms tightened around Lin Qingyu.

Gu Fuzhou let go only after Lin Qingyu bit his lip. Lin Qingyu was gasping softly, his face burning scarlet and his lips glistening with a damp sheen. Light swirled in his wide-open eyes, which were full of a rare, uncharacteristic confusion. He seemed befuddled by all his body's bizarre reactions.

Gu Fuzhou chuckled lightly. "Your face is so red, Physician Lin."

Thank the heavens that Gu Fuzhou's skin was tanned enough that he could make a show of nonchalance. The heat in his face told him that if they'd kissed while he was in his original body, he wouldn't be any less flushed than Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu pressed the back of his hand to his cheek. As he'd expected, it was startlingly warm. He feigned calmness. "I couldn't breathe because of you. It's normal to flush if you feel suffocated."

"Don't you know how to breathe through your nose when kissing, Physician Lin?" Gu Fuzhou asked, surprised.

Though Lin Qingyu was annoyed and embarrassed in equal measure, his response belied his emotions. "I'm not as skilled at that as you."

Gu Fuzhou smiled. "I don't really know how to do it either. I think I learned a few tricks earlier, though. I can teach them to you."

Lin Qingyu looked away. "Some other day, then."

Gu Fuzhou blinked. “Some other…day?”

“It’s late,” Lin Qingyu replied. “I have to go to sleep.”

They slept in their respective bunk beds as usual. It was strange—they’d shared a bed many times before confessing their love to each other, only for them never to do it again after. A strange awkwardness descended upon them every night before they turned in; a mere glance at each other brought a flush to their faces and sped the pounding of their hearts. They’d stew in that embarrassment until they tacitly agreed to climb into their separate beds, acting like shy young wives.

Gu Fuzhou had no idea what first love was like for everyone else, but in his case, it was defined by the restlessness he felt as somebody young and inexperienced. Though he’d known Lin Qingyu for so long and had been in physical contact with him before, he still felt nervous sometimes when it was just the two of them. Yet when anyone else was present, his nerves disappeared.

Now alone with Lin Qingyu—whom he’d just kissed—he felt he mustn’t let his nerves show; he didn’t want to seem pathetic.

He broke the silence with a chuckle. “Qingyu…”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes remained closed. “Why aren’t you asleep yet?”

After he’d composed himself, Lin Qingyu had thought back to that kiss. Something didn’t seem right, but he couldn’t figure out what exactly.

“You’re still up too, aren’t you?” Gu Fuzhou said, a warm smile in his voice. “I just want to tell you—kissing you isn’t tiring at all, and I really like doing it.”

It was like Gu Fuzhou was saying that he wouldn’t enjoy kissing Lin Qingyu if it were tiring. But—as he said—it wasn’t tiring. If it were, Jiang-gongzi probably wouldn’t have liked it that much. *His ‘lifelong dream’ probably came from something like that.*

Lin Qingyu was amused. “As long as you like it.”

“What about you, then?” Gu Fuzhou asked.

Even after he’d waited for a while, Lin Qingyu’s answer never came. He rolled over, about to go to sleep. Only then did he hear a gentle murmured reply from the bottom bunk: “I like it too.”

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When Lin Qingyu went to work the next morning, he was summoned to Fengyi Palace.

The rumors about Jingchun had spread like wildfire, reaching even the emperor. In response, the North King finally took action.

“In his message of greeting to the emperor, the North King wrote that these are merely baseless rumors, and that his queen is a woman inside and out,” the empress told Lin Qingyu. “He also wrote that he’ll investigate the matter seriously and deliver severe punishment to the rumormongers once they are apprehended.”

Zhang Shiquan had left the North Kingdom with his accomplices as soon as their job was done, however, so the North King couldn’t find them even if he tried. The North King had penned this message with no goals but to protect Jingchun and to ensure that no animosity was stirred up between his kingdom and the imperial court.

“Did the emperor believe him?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“The emperor would certainly believe whatever the North King wrote himself.”

“We can’t say for sure,” Lin Qingyu objected. “Do you want to investigate this further, Your Majesty?”

The empress found his question strange. “We already have the truth. What else is there to investigate?” she asked.

“Well, what if the North King deceived the emperor?”

The empress was confused. “Why would the North King lie about this?”

“So that his kingdom could attack when the imperial court let its guard down,” Lin Qingyu said.

The empress’s expression darkened. “This matter is too important for you to speak such nonsense.”

“It’s precisely because this matter is important that His Majesty should look more deeply into it rather than believe the North King so readily. There’s an ancient saying that goes, ‘If he isn’t our kin, he is sure to have a different mind.’[14] As the nation’s matriarch, Your Majesty, it is your responsibility to point His Majesty in the correct direction. I humbly request that Your Majesty remind the emperor that preparing for future catastrophe is how we remain steadfast on the verge of battle.”

“I understand,” the empress replied pensively.

After Lin Qingyu left, the empress took a carriage to the emperor’s quarters. The Department of Imperial Physicians happened to have sent the emperor’s medicine over, and as the empress fed it to the emperor, she repeated everything Lin Qingyu had told her. “In my humble opinion, this matter should be investigated thoroughly,” she concluded.

The emperor studied her curiously.

The empress forced a smile. “Did I say anything wrong?”

“No. I simply didn’t expect that we’d be of the same opinion.” Suspicion clouded the emperor’s face. “The North King must be attempting to conceal something behind his firm denial. You’re right—we must conduct a thorough investigation, but no one must know about it.”

The empress nodded. “You needn’t worry, Your Majesty. I’ll get to the bottom of this.”

The emperor held her hands. “In the Inner Palace, you alone can share my burdens,” he told her warmly.

“Your Majesty…” the empress said, touched.

The rare moment of warmth between the royal couple was interrupted by Xue Ying, who’d come to deliver a message: “Your Majesties, the imperial preceptor wishes to meet with you.”

“If the imperial preceptor has entered the palace so suddenly, it must be over an important matter,” the empress remarked, shocked.

The emperor sat up straight. “Quick—usher him in.”

Xu Junyuan lived detached from the world and rarely asked to meet the emperor in person, coming to the palace only when summoned. The emperor had always treated Xu Junyuan as an important guest, for decades

ago, he'd divined the fortune of Great Yu itself: *Battle for the throne, political marriage with the North Kingdom, and the Ghost Commander*[15] *of Western Xia.*

Over the years, Xu Junyuan's predictions had come true one after another. The emperor had respected divination greatly in the first place, and he now treated Xu Junyuan with exceptional courtesy. An offhand remark from Xu Junyuan might have a stronger impact on the emperor than earnest speeches by all the imperial censors.

Entering the palace, Xu Junyuan was immediately given a seat and told not to stand on ceremony. The imperial preceptor wasn't deferential to the emperor, but he displayed proper etiquette nonetheless. "You appear wan, Your Majesty. I hope that you're taking care of your health."

"Migraines have plagued me for ages. They subside sometimes and get worse at other times. Who knows when this will all end?" the emperor responded, then asked eagerly, "Did you want to meet me because you divined something? Do you know whether my headaches can be cured?"

"You're the son of the true dragon,[16] Your Majesty, while I'm but a mere mortal," Xu Junyuan replied. "My eyes are shrouded by floating clouds—how could I ever divine the fate of the son of the heavens?"

The emperor's shoulders sagged in disappointment. It wasn't the first time he'd asked Xu Junyuan to divine his fate, but the imperial preceptor only gave him answers similar to this one.

The empress spoke. "Why have you come then, Imperial Preceptor? Can it be about Li-er's lost soul?"

The emperor glanced at the empress, his gaze no longer gentle. Sensing his displeasure, the empress had no choice but to fall silent.

Xu Junyuan seemed not to hear the empress's second question. "Last night, this humble official observed the night skies, only to notice signs that pointed to the imminent alignment of four planets[17]—an omen of major turmoil. 'Wars and death rise at once; the virtuous fret, while the common people flee.'"[18]

The emperor was stricken.

Meanwhile, the empress asked with a frown, “Are you saying that war may threaten Great Yu? Or are you talking about the situation in the northwest? Or…”

Rather than answering, Xu Junyuan continued, “There’s also a more peculiar development: In the south, I see signs pointing to the inversion of yin and yang. Strangely, an individual within whom the yang force is more prominent is destined to be queen.”

Someone with a prominent yang force is destined to be queen? The empress turned an uneasy gaze on the emperor. “Your Majesty…”

The blood had drained from the emperor’s face. Looking tense, he commanded the empress grimly, “Unearth Jingchun’s real identity within three days. If you fail, I’ll have Noble Consort Chen do it instead, and the empress’s jade seal and conferral document will no longer be yours.”

The empress knelt immediately. “Understood, Your Majesty.”

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Leaving the palace, Lin Qingyu saw a carriage from the general’s residence parked in front of the gates. He and Gu Fuzhou were more attuned to each other by the day, and they now had a tacit agreement to wait for each other before going home if both had to enter the palace for work.

Lin Qingyu got into the carriage. As he’d expected, Gu Fuzhou was there, napping with his long legs propped up. The moment he noticed Lin Qingyu, he lowered his legs, saying, “You must’ve worked hard today, Physician Lin. We’ll go out for dinner.”

“Where?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Gu Fuzhou pulled Lin Qingyu down to sit beside him. “Jinxiu Pavilion.”

They’d visited Jinxiu Pavilion, the capital’s most famous restaurant, back when Gu Fuzhou was Lu Wancheng. Months later, Jinxiu Pavilion still looked the same, and the person by Lin Qingyu’s side was still Jiang-gongzi.

When Great General Gu and his wife visited, Jinxiu Pavilion wanted to clear out a private room for them, but Gu Fuzhou declined. Instead, he took Lin Qingyu to another chamber divided in two by a screen.

The moment Lin Qingyu sat down, he heard a voice through the screen. “It’s been so long since we last met, Auntie Wu Ya. Have you been well outside the palace?”

That was Xi Rong’s voice. Lin Qingyu gave Gu Fuzhou a questioning look.

“Just wait,” Gu Fuzhou replied in a low voice. “You’ll catch on after a while.”

Then the voice of a woman—who sounded over forty—timidly said, “All has been well. Thank you for your concern, Eunuch Xi.”

“Since His Highness has established a residence outside the palace, I’m no longer a palace eunuch,” Xi Rong said, his voice now tinged with an eerie chill. “Call me ‘Steward Xi,’ Auntie.”

“Yes, Steward Xi. May I ask why the prince of Ning has sought me out?” the woman named Wu Ya asked cautiously, as though treading on thin ice. “Does he need me for something?”

“I vaguely recall that you trained Princess Jingchun at the Ministry of Etiquette,” Xi Rong said.

After brief hesitation, Wu Ya replied, “Yes, I did.”

“You should know whether Princess Jingchun is a man or a woman, then.”

“If Princess Jingchun was a maid in the Ministry of Etiquette, how could she possibly be a man?” Wu Ya asked hastily.

“You sound so certain,” Xi Rong said. “Have you seen the Princess’s body?”

“I haven’t,” Wu Ya said slowly. “But all palace maids have to be inspected by the head lady-in-waiting before they begin working at the palace.”

“Unfortunately, the head lady-in-waiting who inspected Princess Jingchun has died, leaving us with no way to ascertain the truth. Why else

would that lady-in-waiting have been killed, if not because the perpetrator of the deception was afraid that their crime would be exposed?”

“She’s dead?” Wu Ya sounded stricken.

“The empress is currently investigating this matter, and she will reach you in no time,” Xi Rong continued evenly. “His Highness hopes that you can give the empress important leads, in which case you’d be rewarded after your job was done as a matter of course. For instance, your daughter is seriously ill—wouldn’t you want her to be treated by a proper imperial physician?”

“I-I don’t understand what His Highness wants,” Wu Ya stuttered, panicked.

She didn’t understand, but Lin Qingyu did. He turned to Gu Fuzhou. “You want her to provide false testimony?”

“Yes—but the information in that testimony will all be true,” Gu Fuzhou replied.

“But even if you have someone to prove the rumors true, do you have anything you can…” The token Gu Fuzhou had Lin Qingyu take from Shen Huaishi appeared in his mind, and he guessed, “The silk belt?”

“There are three of those belts in total; they’re owned by Shen Huaishi, Jingchun, and Xiao Cheng. They always carry the belts with them as tokens representing their childhood friendship. I guess they never thought that could be their undoing.”

On the other side of the room, Wu Ya didn’t immediately agree to the prince of Ning’s request. Xi Rong didn’t force her to, saying merely, “Go home and consider this properly. I advise you not to take too long, though. It’s not that His Highness can’t wait—it’s your daughter who needs immediate treatment.”

After Wu Ya left, Xi Rong came out from behind the screen. “Good evening, General, Lady.”

“Thank you for making the trip here,” Lin Qingyu said. “Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“That’s fine. His Highness is waiting for me.” Xi Rong clasped his hands and bowed. “I’ll take my leave.”

Xiao Jie had collected military provisions swiftly and efficiently. That was a pleasant surprise to the emperor, who began assigning him more tasks. But Xiao Jie didn't have the faintest idea how to govern a nation and thus had no choice but to rely on Xi Rong. Should Xiao Jie ever ascend to the throne, Lin Qingyu could imagine who would truly sign off on imperial edicts.

Since ancient times, eunuchs gaining immense power had always led to catastrophic outcomes. Lin Qingyu felt that he should prepare an exit route for himself and Gu Fuzhou, just in case, before Xiao Cheng's fate ran its course.

Jinxiu Pavilion boasted a menu of exquisite and varied delicacies. Gu Fuzhou had ordered all their signature dishes, since he and Lin Qingyu didn't often visit the restaurant. But while enjoying their meal, Gu Fuzhou suddenly set his chopsticks down, his expression stricken. "Oh no."

"What's the matter?" Lin Qingyu started in shock. "Is the food poisoned?"

"No," Gu Fuzhou said slowly. "A fish bone got lodged in my throat."

Lin Qingyu was speechless.

Gu Fuzhou sulked. "This is why I hate eating fish. Why must they have bones?"

"Cut it out." Lin Qingyu cradled Gu Fuzhou's chin. "Open your mouth so that I can take a look."

Gu Fuzhou did as he was asked. The fish bone was lodged deeper in his throat than Lin Qingyu could see, however. He poured Gu Fuzhou a cup of tea. "Try and swallow it."

Gu Fuzhou only managed to swallow the bone after downing a jug of water.

"As I thought. I wasn't wrong," Lin Qingyu began meaningfully, studying him.

"About what?" asked Gu Fuzhou. He had a bad premonition.

"You're tall and muscular, Great General, but your tongue is smaller than average," Lin Qingyu said slowly.

Gu Fuzhou was befuddled. “Huh?”

The corners of Lin Qingyu’s lips quirked up. “That’s why, the last time you…” he began teasingly, then trailed off. “I had the feeling that something wasn’t right.”

Gu Fuzhou had nothing to say. The purpose of one’s tongue was mainly to aid with speaking and eating, both actions Gu Fuzhou could do as well as the next person, which was why he’d never noticed his tongue’s size. But now that Lin Qingyu had said so, he realized with shock that his tongue was indeed pretty small—smaller than that of either Lu Wancheng or his original body. If he stuck his tongue out to play dead, no one would believe him.

“You don’t need to dwell on that, though,” Lin Qingyu advised him nonchalantly. “Even if your tongue is small, that doesn’t affect your daily life.” *It’s adorable too.*

Mixed emotions played across Gu Fuzhou’s face. “Thanks, but that’s not comforting at all.”

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Two days later, something momentous occurred in the palace. The crown prince’s birth mother, Noble Consort Chen—whom the emperor had favored for years—was found guilty of abusing her status for selfish gain and bringing disorder to the Inner Palace. She was stripped of her title and relegated to the Cold Palace.[19] This sudden development appeared only to concern the Inner Palace, but it was actually interconnected with the imperial court’s affairs.

Despite his sickness, Xiao Cheng knelt before Qinzheng Hall through the night. Nonetheless, the emperor refused to see him, showing no familial love to mother or son. Not only was the crown prince gradually losing the emperor’s favor, he now also lacked his mother’s support. On the other hand, Xiao Jie had recently received the title of “prince of Ning” and the great responsibilities that came with it.

Civil officials and imperial censors close to the crown prince were wary and cautious now. They didn't even know why the noble consort had been stripped of her title, so how could they plead to the emperor on her behalf?

Rumors spread both inside and outside the palace about what had happened that day, but only a few people knew the truth—including Wu Ya, the palace maid Xi Rong had spoken to.

Later, Lin Qingyu heard everything from Xi Rong. Apparently, after failing to find any clues pertaining to Jingchun in the palace, the empress had no choice but to order an investigation outside it. Princess Jingchun had begun working in the palace a decade earlier, and most of the palace maids from back then had left the palace to start families, Wu Ya among them.

The emperor placed so much weight on this investigation that he'd brought up the empress's jade seal and conferral document. The empress took this seriously, and she did everything herself, including interrogating Wu Ya.

Wu Ya didn't state Jingchun's identity outright; she merely said that Jingchun was different from the other palace maids. Jingchun never menstruated and wore high-necked clothing regardless of the season. Wu Ya had only noticed that Jingchun's throat differed from the other maids' when she'd seen Jingchun in the changing rooms. When Wu Ya informed the head lady-in-waiting, she was told that she was mistaken, and she was forbidden to spread word of what she'd seen.

"So the head lady-in-waiting protected Jingchun?" the empress asked. "She was just a palace maid, so how would she have the power to do that?"

Wu Ya took out a purple silk belt. "After Princess Jingchun married, I cleaned the house she'd lived in, as ordered—and I came across this. The silk ribbons used in this belt were specially made in the palace solely for consorts and princes. I wanted to give you this, Your Majesty, but the Ministry of Etiquette's head lady-in-waiting was suddenly replaced, and I was framed for a crime and forced out of the palace."

The empress took the belt and studied it; she found it familiar. "This belt style was popular in the palace ten years ago, but it's rare now."

“The belt the crown prince wears with his jade pendant is identical to this one,” the sharp-eyed Laifu pointed out. “They must be a pair!”

“Are you sure?” the empress asked gravely.

“I’m certain I have it right, Your Majesty. The crown prince wears that pendant every day when he comes to greet Your Majesty at Fengyi Palace.”

“Very well…very well.” The empress couldn’t conceal her excitement. “Prepare a carriage. I’m going to meet the emperor now.”

“Your Majesty!” Wu Ya called. “There’s something else—but I’m not sure I should report it.”

The empress couldn’t wait. “What else?”

“This only came to mind after you mentioned the crown prince, Your Majesty,” Wu Ya began. “But, when Princess Jingchun was a palace maid, she was in charge of delivering the crown prince’s writing materials. I once stumbled across them in the imperial garden, and I overheard them talking about their childhood and Changsheng Temple…”

Something flashed in Laifu’s mind. “When the crown prince was still a child, he lived with Noble Consort Chen in Changsheng Temple for a while to avoid the epidemic. Might that be relevant? No need to be hasty, Your Majesty—you can report to the emperor after a thorough investigation.”

After they inquired, Changsheng Temple soon sent word back. According to a monk working there, the crown prince hadn’t just been accompanied by palace maids and eunuchs while residing at the temple, but also by two young boys of similar age. One was Shen Huaishi, a young guard the Tianyu Sect had sent to protect the crown prince; the other was a boy Changsheng Temple had adopted. He’d shaved his head and become a monk at a young age, and he was always smiling, loved and adored by everyone. Although their statuses differed, the three boys were always together—they were childhood friends who chatted and had fun with one another.

Later, the little monk’s biological parents went to the temple in search of him and made him leave his life there behind. The empress followed this clue, and the investigation she ordered revealed that the boy’s parents had

both been addicted to gambling. They'd asked for their child back so that they could sell him to the palace to be trained as a eunuch, but the little monk had disappeared after entering the palace. The empress commanded the Directorate of Ceremonial to look into the matter, only for them to find nothing about the boy.

After receiving word about that development, the empress couldn't wait any longer. Armed with her evidence, she requested an audience with the emperor.

"After entering the palace, Jingchun transformed from a eunuch to a palace maid," the empress proclaimed. "But why would anyone have risked death to help him if they weren't close to him? He only knew two people in the palace back then: the crown prince and Shen Huaishi, who was unfailingly loyal to the crown prince. I'm certain that the crown prince is complicit in Jingchun's deception, Your Majesty."

After listening to her story, the emperor fell silent for a while, staring at the purple belt. Then he said, "Summon Noble Consort Chen."

The empress was stunned. "Your Majesty?"

"Go," the emperor ordered coldly.

Noble Consort Chen was brought to Qinzheng Hall. With no way to refute the mountain of conclusive evidence on her son's behalf, she knelt there in total shock, tears in her eyes. "It was me! It was I who did it! I took a liking to the obedient, adorable Jingchun when I lived in Changsheng Temple. I couldn't bear to see him endure the pain of castration, so I ended up arranging something terribly idiotic. I never expected the North King to set his sights on Jingchun… I didn't do this on purpose, Your Majesty!"

Slamming her palm on the table, the empress rose from her seat. "Nonsense! Is your failure to discipline your son not an egregious enough crime for you, Noble Consort? Do you wish to be guilty of deceiving the emperor as well?"

"I tell nothing but the truth, Your Majesty!" Tears streamed down Noble Consort Chen's face, erasing her beauty. Still, she didn't hesitate in the slightest. "I gave Jingchun that belt as a gift. Both it and the crown prince's belt were from my quarters—they're a pair. The crown prince doesn't know about this."

“A palace maid from the Ministry of Etiquette repeatedly happened across the crown prince and Jingchun meeting alone. How can you explain that?”

“Princess Jingchun was the most beautiful maiden in the capital. It was completely reasonable for the crown prince to favor him,” Noble Consort Chen said between sobs. “But after Jingchun was married off to the North King, the crown prince never spoke to him again.”

“Nonsense! This concerns the North Kingdom’s safety, so I ask that you exercise sound judgment, Your Majesty!” Rage clouded the empress’s own judgment, or she would’ve noticed that the emperor intended to detach Xiao Cheng from this scandal.

“That’s enough.” The emperor shut his eyes. “From today onward, Lady Chen is stripped of her title of noble consort and relegated to the Cold Palace. This debacle ends here.”

When he heard of this development, Lin Qingyu wasn’t surprised. “As we thought, the emperor will want to keep Xiao Cheng in his position unless he’s forced to take drastic measures.”

“Noble Consort Chen went to such lengths to protect her son, but she wasn’t aware that her son’s fate is interconnected with hers. Now that his mother has been stripped of her title, Xiao Cheng will be left alone, without support. Not to mention that he’s lost the emperor’s favor as well. How long can he hold up, I wonder?” Gu Fuzhou chuckled. “We were naughty again, Qingyu.”

Lin Qingyu smiled. Doing bad things with someone else felt much better than doing them alone.

Chapter 81

NOT ONLY WAS Noble Consort Chen stripped of her title, but the crown prince was also severely reprimanded by the emperor, which provoked paranoia and fear in the imperial court.

Having achieved his goal, Lin Qingyu paused his plans and lay low. He went only to the palace and spent most of his days in the general's residence, reading, brewing poison, and rearing gu creatures.

As early as his decision to help a new emperor take the throne, he'd begun to rear these insects so that he could use gu to threaten the emperor and control imperial officials as soon as he could. He'd be using gu different from that typical in the South; after all, it would have to evade the other imperial physicians' watchful eyes. That wouldn't be easy, as each physician was skilled in his own right.

After several attempts, and the deaths of numerous insects, Lin Qingyu's efforts had finally yielded results this spring. Those results took the form of a female scorpion—a southern variety only about the size of the nail on his pinky. Despite her size, the scorpion had defeated her enemies one after another and emerged as the victor among the many venomous species he'd raised alongside her. She planted gu by sneaking into her targets' bodies while they were asleep and laying her eggs inside them.

Lin Qingyu was fully focused on the gu scorpion he was rearing. The first thing he did after waking up every day was check on the scorpion; thus, he no longer had time to send Gu Fuzhou off to work. He also wasn't there to welcome Gu Fuzhou when the general came back. When Gu Fuzhou headed to the study in search of his wife that evening, he saw Lin Qingyu feeding the tiny scorpion bits of specially made minced meat with a miniature set of tongs. Gentle and patient, he devoted his full attention to the task, not even noticing that his husband was back.

Gu Fuzhou felt like laughing. The last time Lin Qingyu had fed *him*, he'd been Lu Wancheng. It had been ages since he'd enjoyed that privilege, but this tiny gu scorpion was hand-fed every meal by the great beauty. He coughed lightly to alert Lin Qingyu to his presence.

Lin Qingyu continued his motions without looking up. “You’re back.”

Gu Fuzhou casually loosened the collar of his uniform, then sat down by Lin Qingyu, leaning back on the table. He craned his neck to look at Lin Qingyu, who was facing the other way, and said, “I’m hungry.”

“Tell the kitchens,” Lin Qingyu replied. “It’s not like *I* can cook.”

Gu Fuzhou’s words lodged in his throat. He turned sideways to prop his chin on Lin Qingyu’s shoulder. “I want to eat with you.”

“I’m very busy,” Lin Qingyu said. Gu Fuzhou’s weight on his shoulder made it difficult to move his right arm. Feeding the tiny gu scorpion was a delicate task, and Gu Fuzhou was in the way, so Lin Qingyu drove him off. “Go eat your dinner and stop bothering me here.”

Looking at the hideous scorpion feasting on its meal in the jar, Gu Fuzhou felt sadness come over him. “If my soul has to enter another body, it might as well be that scorpion’s. It just eats and sleeps all day, and a beautiful man feeds it every meal. Look at me now, attending court meetings and lifting weights. Every morning, I wake up when the sky’s still dark, and I work till I’m dog-tired. My life is sadder than an insect’s.”

Lin Qingyu finally deigned to face him. “Don’t say such idiotic things,” he snapped, displeased. “Your soul will *never* enter another body.” After all, if his soul were to do that, it would be when his body was dead.

Realizing that what he’d said had touched on Lin Qingyu’s sore spot, Gu Fuzhou changed the topic immediately. “By the way, Qingyu, I’ve already had Wu Ya taken to a house out in the open and sent men I trust to stand guard in the shadows. Now we can wait and see when Xiao Cheng will show up.”

Lin Qingyu nodded slightly. “Things have almost resolved on the emperor’s end as well.”

Last autumn, he’d helped the gravely ill emperor escape death. But now that Xiao Cheng’s days as crown prince were numbered, the emperor was no longer of any value to them; it was high time that he returned to death’s door.

Lin Qingyu smiled faintly at the tiny gu scorpion. “Do your best for your father, my child.”

Gu Fuzhou was speechless.

Devoting his affection to the gu scorpion, Lin Qingyu seemingly almost forgot that he was wed to a husband to whom he’d recently pledged his love. For a while, Gu Fuzhou thought that Lin Qingyu would even hug that porcelain jar housing the creature in his sleep. Fortunately, Lin Qingyu wasn’t at that point yet. Gu Fuzhou understood his behavior: Lin Qingyu had spent so much effort on the gu scorpion, and he’d gone through countless failures before the scorpion survived. This was like the way academics in his hometown safeguarded and treasured the hard-earned results of their research.

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Another day, Lin Qingyu accidentally splashed chicken blood onto his hands while feeding the gu scorpion. He disliked the smell, so he went to wash his hands immediately. Only when he came back did he realize that he’d forgotten to cover the jar, which was now empty.

Lin Qingyu’s heart crept up into his throat, but he managed to maintain a semblance of calmness. It’d only been a moment since he left to wash his hands, and a tiny scorpion couldn’t crawl far, so she must have still been in this room. He searched the area closest to him first, then went farther, leaving no stone unturned. The gu scorpion was very small; he’d miss her if he was careless.

He was just about to call in his servants to help look for her when he noticed a crawling black dot from the corner of his eye. Heaving a long sigh of relief, he grabbed the porcelain jar from its spot and prepared to catch the tiny thing that had run away from her home. He was close to succeeding when a leg appeared in his field of sight, and a voice rang in his ear. “Young Master, what do you want for dinner?”

As Lin Qingyu stared, the gu scorpion he’d spent all his effort on raising had vanished beneath the sole of Huantong’s shoe. The blood drained from his face, and he froze on the spot.

Huantong had no idea that he'd trampled his young master's "child" to death. "Young Master?" he repeated, confused.

Lin Qingyu shut his eyes as though to convince himself that if he hadn't seen it, it hadn't happened.

When he remained silent, Huantong grew more anxious. "What's wrong, Young Master?"

Lin Qingyu could always conceal his emotions, and now wasn't an exception. He still sounded calm when he said, "You trampled my gu scorpion to death."

"Ah!" Huantong took a huge leap back, and the scorpion's carcass indeed lay where he'd stood. He knew how important the creature was, and his voice shook when he spoke. "Young Master, I-I didn't do that on purpose. I didn't know it was there…"

Lin Qingyu cast his gaze down at the gu scorpion lying there and sighed softly.

With a thud, Huantong fell to his knees. "This is my fault, Young Master! Please punish me! Strike me thirty times with a heavy stick, and withhold my allowance for a month… No, three months! Please don't be sad, Young Master…"

"There's no need for any punishment," Lin Qingyu said blandly. "You can bury her instead. But her corpse is poisonous, so be careful."

Huantong wrapped the tiny gu scorpion's carcass in a handkerchief and buried it under a tree in the back courtyard. After that was done, he headed to the study, where Lin Qingyu was reading as though nothing had happened. He approached Lin Qingyu tentatively. "Young Master."

"All done?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"Yes," Huantong replied. He added haltingly, "I'll ask Steward Yuan for thirty beatings anyway, Young Master."

"No need."

"But you put so much effort into rearing that gu scorpion. Do you really not mind that I killed it?"

“What’s done is done, so there’d be no point in getting cross,” Lin Qingyu said evenly. “She’s already dead. However much I complain, and however much I punish you, she won’t come back.”

“I’m sorry, Young Master,” Huantong said, ashamed.

“Don’t dwell on it. It wasn’t entirely your fault anyway.”

Lin Qingyu tended to be protective of anyone he was close to. He didn’t care in the slightest about those he deemed irrelevant, but he was always lenient toward those close to him. Besides, Huantong’s shoe couldn’t have crushed the gu scorpion to death if Lin Qingyu hadn’t forgotten to shut the jar lid, so *he* was the one responsible.

Huantong watched over Lin Qingyu for a while, but his worries were finally assuaged as he saw that Lin Qingyu was fine.

When it was almost time for dinner, someone outside reported that the general was back. Lin Qingyu abruptly set down the medical book he was reading and strode out of the study.

The moment Gu Fuzhou stepped into the yard, he saw his beautiful wife rushing toward him, breaking into a run at the end. This was an honor he wasn’t accustomed to, and the exhaustion he’d felt throughout the day melted away.

Lin Qingyu stopped in front of him. “You’re back.”

Seeing Lin Qingyu’s expression, Gu Fuzhou knew that something was wrong. “Qingyu?”

The concern on Gu Fuzhou’s face erased Lin Qingyu’s composure. “The gu scorpion died,” he whispered.

Gu Fuzhou picked up on the hint of agitation and resentment in his voice. Realizing the gravity of the matter, he wrapped the fragile beauty in his arms and asked, “How?”

“I forgot to cover the jar, and she crawled down to the floor. Then…” Lin Qingyu’s voice trembled. “Then Huantong stepped on her.”

Gu Fuzhou’s heart twinged as his broad palm stroked Lin Qingyu’s hair. “Okay, don’t worry. It’s fine. I’ll help you think of something—this time, you don’t even need to call me ‘laogong.’ Don’t be sad.”

Lin Qingyu buried his face in Gu Fuzhou's chest. Since the general had just come back from working with the Iron Cavalry, he was wearing metal armor as cold as Lin Qingyu's grief.

"What can you do?" Lin Qingyu complained. "She's already dead—beyond saving. I spent a whole month caring for her so that she'd grow this big, and just like that, she was gone with a stomp of his foot."

"We can rear another," Gu Fuzhou suggested.

"Easy for you to say," Lin Qingyu replied. "You know how many times I attempted it before this one survived."

This was tough, and Gu Fuzhou now cared about nothing but his current priority: cheering up the great beauty. Lin Qingyu didn't have an appetite, so Gu Fuzhou went hungry with him. He led Lin Qingyu to their bedroom and dismissed the servants there.

Lin Qingyu sat by the table, his expression wooden. With no one else present, he didn't need to conceal his emotions. He could always be himself around Gu Fuzhou.

Gu Fuzhou studied Lin Qingyu under the candlelight. Lin Qingyu was truly unhappy, judging by the reddened corners of his eyes. The great beauty—usually calm and collected as he poisoned victims mercilessly—looked almost pitiful.

Feeling awkward under his gaze, Lin Qingyu asked, "Why are you staring at me?"

"The legendary general Huo Qubing was made a marquess at the age of seventeen, and the warlord Sun Ce dominated Jiangdong at eighteen," Gu Fuzhou began casually. "Meanwhile, my Physician Lin sulks and refuses to eat dinner at twenty because his gu scorpion died."

Lin Qingyu glared at him. "You think you're funny?"

Gu Fuzhou laughed. "I can't sulk with you, can I? If I'm dejected too, who'll be left to cheer you up?"

Lin Qingyu narrowed his eyes. "I can't believe that you can laugh at a time like this."

“I’m very sad that the gu scorpion died too. It won’t come back to life, though, so both of us have to get past it,” Gu Fuzhou advised him patiently. “You have to eat your dinner. How else will you get the stamina you need to conspire for other people’s riches and take their lives?”

“I know that,” Lin Qingyu said expressionlessly. “But I don’t want dinner now.”

Gu Fuzhou employed his last resort. “Shall I let you bury your face in my abs?”

Lin Qingyu eyed him. “This again.”

“I’m offering to strip and let you bury your face into my abs, even though it’s so cold outside. That’s not enough for you?” Gu Fuzhou paused. “Or I can let you play with my little tongue.”

Lin Qingyu arched a brow. “How do I do that?”

He was abruptly kissed on the lips, and Gu Fuzhou whispered in his ear, “How do you want to do it, Physician Lin?”

They weren’t intimate that often, so Lin Qingyu hadn’t gotten used to such gestures. His heart stuttering in his chest, he unintentionally tried to scoot back, but Gu Fuzhou’s palm covered the back of his head so that he couldn’t shy away.

Lin Qingyu looked into Gu Fuzhou’s eyes. They gleamed as bright as stars, and he saw his face reflected in them. Entranced, Lin Qingyu heard Gu Fuzhou chuckle lightly.

As the general bent to kiss him, Yuan Yin’s voice rang outside: “General, Lady, something’s happened with Wu Ya.”

Chapter 82

ON THE WESTERN SIDE of the capital was a small house just a street away from bustling Yongxing Street. Just past midnight, a sedan stopped in front of that house, and a man in a guard's uniform opened the curtains and helped the person in the chair down. "Your Highness."

Xiao Cheng coughed lightly. "Have you investigated this matter thoroughly?"

"Yes, Your Highness," the guard replied. "Wu Ya, a palace maid who worked at the Ministry of Etiquette, lives here."

Xiao Cheng's gaze darkened as he stared at the firmly shut doors. "We're going in."

It was already far past curfew; the average person would be fast asleep. On this dark night, gusty winds blew, and the moon was nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, dim light shone from inside the house, casting a slender silhouette on the window.

Someone had seemingly been waiting here for a long time.

Xiao Cheng's rational side told him that this was very likely a trap, but he couldn't find it in himself to care about anything else right now. Even if it was a trap, he had to jump into it now for clues that would help him find Shen Huaishi. Fortunately, he'd brought a group of guards—that would make his assassination incredibly difficult for whoever was inside the house. Xiao Cheng had nothing to worry about.

He gestured for the guards to open the door. Two did so, gripping their sabers tightly. The door's creaking pierced the dead silence.

They were greeted by the sight of a man clad in white, standing in the room, his back to the light. The man had a beautiful face, but his aura was as cold as jade. He clasped his hands and bowed. "Your Highness."

Xiao Cheng coughed, his gaze darkening. "It's *you*, Lin Qingyu."

Smiling, Lin Qingyu asked derisively, "What happened to 'Xiao-Qingyu,' Your Highness?"

Xiao Cheng waved his hand. “Guards, take your leave.”

A guard hesitated. “Your Highness…”

Perhaps it was a lingering result of Shen Huaishi stabbing him in the chest, or perhaps a reaction to Lin Qingyu’s derisive words, but Xiao Cheng’s face was starkly pale. Despite that, the crown prince smirked confidently. “He’s just a physician—so weak he couldn’t even strangle a chicken. Do you think he can stab me in the chest? Just wait outside.”

The guards stepped out of the room, leaving Lin Qingyu and Xiao Cheng alone. Xiao Cheng stared at Lin Qingyu’s face—at the man he’d once coveted because his brow and eyes resembled Jingchun’s. He realized now how ludicrous that had been.

The man standing across from him was calculating and venomous; ambitions and tactics hid behind his stunningly beautiful face. If Lin Qingyu was standing here now, did that mean that he was controlling everything behind the scenes?

Someone like him could *never* resemble Jingchun.

“You seem to have something to ask me,” Lin Qingyu said.

“That belt Wu Ya revealed didn’t belong to Jingchun,” Xiao Cheng said with conviction.

There were three of those belts in total. One had been for himself, and the remaining two were gifts for Shen Huaishi and Jingchun. They were a token of their childhood friendship.

They’d met in Changsheng Temple—a prince, a shadow guard, and an orphaned little monk. The three were different from each other. The crown prince was arrogant, the guard honest, and the monk childish and naïve. Each was of a different status, which meant that they shouldn’t have grown too close to each other. Xiao Cheng’s mother had also told him that he’d be the crown prince, then the emperor, and an emperor didn’t need friends. But he’d been so young back then. Although he’d been mature for a child, he was ultimately still just that—a child.

The days he’d spent in Changsheng Temple in his youth had been the most relaxed, happy times of his life. He didn’t need to battle against his half brothers, didn’t need to present himself as polite and well-behaved in

front of his mother, and didn’t need to do everything he could to win his father’s favor. It was as though he was merely an ordinary child with two good friends.

After the epidemic ended, he and Shen Huaishi had bade goodbye to Jingchun and returned to the palace. Xiao Cheng was a prince, and thus he wasn’t allowed to leave the palace, but Shen Huaishi could. Anytime he did, he visited Jingchun at Changsheng Temple, occasionally bringing a letter from Jingchun back to Xiao Cheng. But one day, when Shen Huaishi couldn’t find Jingchun in the temple, he asked around only to learn that Jingchun’s parents had found him, and he’d been taken home. Finding Jingchun among an endless sea of people wasn’t an easy task for two young boys, and neither Xiao Cheng nor Shen Huaishi expected to see Jingchun again at the palace.

A group of young eunuchs-to-be, new to the palace, had been waiting in line outside the Directorate of Ceremonial for old eunuchs to castrate them. When Shen Huaishi passed them, he heard a familiar sob that made him stop and look, only to spot his and His Highness’s good friend there. Jingchun wore tattered clothes, and his face was stained with snot and tears; the tip of his nose was red from crying.

Shen Huaishi saved Jingchun, leading him to Xiao Cheng, but the palace’s strict rules meant that those with unknown origins couldn’t stay. Xiao Cheng wanted to send Jingchun away from the palace, but Jingchun—buried in Shen Huaishi’s arms—cried until he struggled to breathe. He said he didn’t want to leave the palace, and more than that, he didn’t want to go home and be violently beaten by his father. He wanted to stay in the palace with his two good friends.

Eunuchs had to be inspected every now and then. Jingchun could escape those inspections for a while, but he’d have to face one someday. But Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi couldn’t bear to let Jingchun be castrated, so Xiao Cheng—using his own methods—had Jingchun take the place of a young palace maid who’d suddenly died from an illness. The young Xiao Cheng didn’t have any idea how much trouble his actions would cause him in the future; he was gleefully satisfied with his meticulous scheme.

After that, their friendship continued for years in the palace. But quietly, without forewarning, it took a turn.

After growing up, Xiao Cheng went to great lengths to obtain the position of crown prince. He didn't even hesitate to abandon the Tianyu Sect, which had always been unfailingly loyal to him. For the sake of his goals, he could cut everything out of his life—save for his bond with his two childhood friends.

The emperor had wanted Xiao Cheng to eradicate the Tianyu Sect because they were loyal to the crown prince, and Xiao Cheng had personally planned their demise. Although he'd hesitated at the last moment because of Shen Huaishi, he'd failed to prevent the sect's destruction. Fortunately, he'd saved Shen Huaishi. But it was also his softheartedness and penchant for hesitation that made his father dissatisfied with him, rendering him powerless to stop the marriage between Jingchun and the North King.

If he hadn't let Shen Huaishi go free, could he have kept Jingchun by his side? He'd pondered that question many times. Yet, strangely, he'd never regretted his decision.

The day before Jingchun's marriage, the three of them had met in secret. Jingchun hugged Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi, tears in his eyes, tightly gripping the silk belt that represented their friendship. He said that he'd kill himself before the North King discovered his identity, and that he'd avoid leaving even his dead body in the North Kingdom. That way, he wouldn't implicate his friends, and war wouldn't break out between Great Yu and the North Kingdom because of him.

On the day of Jingchun's marriage, Xiao Cheng watched Jingchun leave for the North Kingdom, wearing the silk belt. He later learned from the Tianji Guard that Jingchun was living comfortably in the North Kingdom with its king, who showered him with affection. He didn't know whether Jingchun's identity had been exposed, and that possibility became a heavy stone hovering above his head, threatening to crush him at any time. He had no choice but to ascend to the throne as soon as possible, so that when Jingchun's identity was exposed, he could protect both himself and Shen Huaishi.

The belt Wu Ya had taken out belonged neither to Jingchun nor Xiao Cheng—it could only have been Shen Huaishi's. After Jingchun's departure, Shen Huaishi had kept himself busy carrying out Xiao Cheng's errands, and he'd always been alone; Lin Qingyu was the only other person he'd spoken to.

Therefore, Lin Qingyu…knew Shen Huaishi's whereabouts.

Xiao Cheng's burning gaze pierced the man standing across from him. "Where is he?"

Lin Qingyu shook his head. "I don't know."

"Nonsense!" Xiao Cheng snapped, breathing fast. "If you didn't meet him, how did you get that belt?"

"What are you talking about, Your Highness?" Lin Qingyu asked. "Wu Ya found that belt in Jingchun's room after his wedding."

Xiao Cheng bared his teeth in a malevolent laugh. "You can fool everyone else, but not me! Jingchun brought his belt to the North Kingdom—there's no way you'd ever get your hands on it, capable as you might be. The belt you gave Wu Ya belonged to Shen Huaishi!"

Lin Qingyu laughed as well. "You sound so certain, Your Highness. Why not tell His Majesty and have me punished for deceiving the emperor?"

"Lin Qingyu!" Xiao Cheng barked.

Lin Qingyu's beauty clashed with his inexplicably sinister smile. "I understand. Noble Consort Chen—no, I should call her *Lady* Chen now—already confessed to her crimes, claiming that she was behind everything and that you weren't aware of any of it. If you exposed me before the emperor, revealing that you *did* know, wouldn't Lady Chen's efforts go to waste?"

The metallic tang of blood filled Xiao Cheng's mouth. He just wanted to cut the flesh off this beautiful man as venomous as a snake or scorpion, grind his bones into dust and scatter his ashes in the wind. His pale lips mottled bright red, Xiao Cheng snarled coldly, "I'll ask you again. Where is Shen Huaishi?"

“I’ll answer your question a second time. Listen carefully, Your Highness,” Lin Qingyu said. “I don’t know where he is. He had someone else bring me the belt.”

Xiao Cheng’s chest heaved violently. “That’s impossible!”

“Why?” Lin Qingyu took a threatening step forward. “How did you think I learned the truth about what happened years ago, Your Highness? Shen Huaishi couldn’t take your life by stabbing you in the chest, nor could he strip you of your title as crown prince. Thus, he has no choice but to think of something else. Isn’t that so?”

“Shut up!” Xiao Cheng coughed violently, his eyes bloodshot. “However much Shen Huaishi hates me, he’ll never want to kill me!”

At this point, Xiao Cheng was neglecting to speak with the noble elegance that befitted a crown prince. Lin Qingyu figured he wasn’t far from utterly losing control.

He scoffed. Why had Shen Huaishi failed to take Xiao Cheng’s life that day? Had he made a mistake, or had he shown Xiao Cheng mercy? Lin Qingyu now had his answer.

“Guard Shen handed me this belt of his own volition. He’s skilled in combat, and he can conceal traces of himself so adeptly that even the Tianji Guard couldn’t find him. Meanwhile, I’m merely a doctor who can’t even kill a chicken. I could hardly force him to give it to me.” Lin Qingyu gazed at the plot-armored “protagonist” coldly with the eyes so similar to Jingchun’s. “You said that he wouldn’t want to kill you, but you’re as sickly as you are now precisely because he stabbed you in the chest. You’re even weaker than Young Marquess Lu was. You think that Shen Huaishi couldn’t bear to treat you with cruelty—but is that true?”

Xiao Cheng gaped. His face, once handsome, now contorted fiercely; his eyes, once those of a frivolous and fickle man, were now dark with burning love and hatred.

Lin Qingyu smiled. “Perhaps he doesn’t want to kill you, as you said. You did save his life—but the Tianyu Sect was destroyed because of you. And did you ever treat him well after you saved him? You treated him like a forbidden lover you could freely humiliate in bed. Outside of your bedroom, he had to risk his life doing your bidding. All the injuries on his

body, big and small, he bore because of you. And he came close to death more than once.

“What fun would there be in killing you instantly? Wouldn’t it be more fun to watch as you were tortured—as everyone close to you abandoned you, the emperor and nation cast you aside, and you became as insignificant as a weed in the dirt?”

Xiao Cheng took an involuntary step back, leaning on a pillar to keep himself upright. His lips trembled continuously as he muttered in disbelief, “No… That’s not…”

“I’m telling you the truth, Your Highness,” Lin Qingyu said calmly. “It’s your choice whether you want to believe it.”

His face now purple, Xiao Cheng looked up at the beauty mark at the corner of Lin Qingyu’s eye. He grunted, blood trickling from the corners of his lips. “Guards…” Blood streamed out of his mouth, soaking the four-clawed dragon embroidered over his chest. “Guards!”

Hearing the commotion inside the room, the guards waiting outside barged in. “Your Highness!”

Two guards supported Xiao Cheng on either side while a third drew his saber and pressed it against Lin Qingyu’s shoulder. “Assassin! What did you do to His Highness?!”

Lin Qingyu glanced down at Xiao Cheng imperiously. “Leave a single scratch on me, and you’ll never see Shen Huaishi again.”

With difficulty, Xiao Cheng shut his eyes. “Fall back,” he ordered.

Lin Qingyu smiled blandly. “Farewell, Your Highness. I won’t see you out.”

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Waiting quietly in a side room, Gu Fuzhou had listened to the dramatic conversation in its entirety. He knew that any battle today would only be verbal; still, he’d had his trusted men surround the house, just in case.

When Xiao Cheng's guards barged in, he'd felt uneasy, but his wife was capable; with just a few sentences, Lin Qingyu had extricated himself safely from the situation.

At midnight, Lin Qingyu pushed open the door to the side room. Gu Fuzhou joined him, yawning. "All done?"

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Xiao Cheng vomited blood."

That had to be quite serious. He'd vomited blood in Lu Wancheng's body; after that, he'd quickly weakened, and he'd died in front of Lin Qingyu merely a few months later.

Gu Fuzhou unfastened his cape and draped it over Lin Qingyu's shoulders, then gently covered the crown of Lin Qingyu's head with his palm. "Let's wrap up here and go home."

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After returning to the Eastern Palace, Xiao Cheng fell so ill that he couldn't get out of bed. Lady Chen's relegation to the Cold Palace had presumably hit him hard. Since the onset of his sudden illness during the past year, the crown prince had been forced to rely on medicine. The imperial physicians said that he could live a few more decades as a sickly man if he focused on recuperation and maintained a calm state of mind. But his rage had caused his dormant injuries to flare up, and he fell into a coma he was unlikely to survive.

Now that Xiao Cheng was so terribly ill, he naturally wasn't equal to managing the nation's affairs. On the emperor's orders, the token belonging to the commander of the Tianji Guard was reclaimed from him. The prince of Ning, Xiao Jie, happened to be in need of capable subordinates to aid his investigation of the spies from Western Xia who had infiltrated Great Yu. Thus, he was granted the right to command the organization of shadow guards who worked for the emperor.

When it rained, it poured. Dark clouds of gloom hovered over the Eastern Palace, and the emperor hadn't gone to Qinzheng Hall for days. As summer came, the days gradually grew hotter, but the emperor's sickness

didn’t begin to abate as usual. Everyone in the Department of Imperial Physicians—including Lin Qingyu, who lacked a formal position—worried over the emperor and crown prince’s health but failed to find any solutions.

The emperor was on his last breath from his torturous migraines. It felt as though a hammer inside his head was continuously smashing his brain. His moans of pain reverberated in his quarters from evening until dawn; eventually, his agony was so intense that he couldn’t even muster the energy to open his mouth.

The imperial physicians were all helpless against his predicament, which left the emperor with no choice but to rely on Lin Qingyu and hope that the young physician could save him a second time. He even bestowed the position of deputy head imperial physician upon Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu didn’t disappoint; he soon provided the emperor with a new prescription that allayed his headaches. What followed, however, were extended bouts of deep, coma-like sleep. The emperor was disoriented all day, waking from his sleep unsure whether it was dawn or dusk, night or day—although he no longer seemed to be in any pain.

Lin Rushan was head imperial physician, and the ingredients of the emperor’s new medicine didn’t escape him. Approaching Lin Qingyu, he began hesitantly, “Qingyu, that medicine you made for His Majesty…”

“His Majesty said that he didn’t want to feel pain anymore, so I stopped it,” Lin Qingyu said. “I’m following his orders, Father, so you needn’t worry.”

This didn’t assuage Lin Rushan’s concerns. “Do you truly understand what you’re doing? The crown prince and Lady Chen are powerless right now, but what if the empress and the prince of Ning hear about this? Will they allow you to continue?”

Lin Qingyu gave him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Father. I know what I’m doing. You can stop fretting over this matter.”

Lin Rushan heaved a long sigh. “All right. You’ve always been your own person, I know—but be careful.”

Now that the emperor and crown prince had fallen sick one after the other, the crucial responsibility of ruling the nation naturally fell on the prince of Ning’s shoulders. Xiao Jie used to have nothing to speak of but his

looks—his birth mother had been of low status, and he lacked both talent and virtue. No one had ever expected him to reign over Great Yu one day. Those imperial officials with close ties with Xiao Cheng were disgruntled at first, but Xiao Jie had completed all the tasks the emperor gave him proficiently, showing great improvement. They had no choice but to come to terms with his new position.

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Busy with the nation's affairs, Xiao Jie hadn't been back to his residence in days. He was staying in an ancillary palace of Qinzheng Hall with Xi Rong, taking care to attend his sick father and greet his legal mother even while managing countless affairs every day.

Some months later, Xiao Jie had become known for his dedication to governing the nation, as well as for his loyalty and filial devotion.

When Lin Qingyu was summoned to Qinzheng Hall, the messenger told him that the prince of Ning was unwell. Arriving at the ancillary palace, Lin Qingyu saw Xiao Jie resting his face on his desk, fast asleep. His fingers were wrapped around his brush in a loose grip, and ink specks dotted his nose.

"Your Highness?" Lin Qingyu whispered.

"Imperial Physician Lin, you're here," Xi Rong said from behind.

Lin Qingyu turned to face him. He'd seen Xi Rong around often in the palace recently. The steward was several times busier than he had been when he was working in the prince's residence, but he didn't look at all tired. Instead, he looked energetic; he was almost glowing. He seemed to enjoy his current life.

Lin Qingyu chuckled.

"May I know what's so funny, Imperial Physician Lin?" Xi Rong asked politely, pouring him a cup of tea.

"That you, Steward Xi, are on opposite end of a spectrum from the general." Lin Qingyu took the cup Xi Rong was handing to him. "The busier you keep yourself, the more energetic you look, Steward Xi. If my

husband were in your position, he'd start complaining loudly and shirking his tasks in less than two days."

Something flashed in Xi Rong's eyes. He wondered whether Lin Qingyu had just brought up his husband offhandedly, or if he was alluding to something.

"Great General Gu has worked hard for years for the sake of the nation, and for peace in the northwest lands," he replied with a smile. "His Highness has granted him the right not to attend daily morning meetings simply so that he can rest well. Would you like to request further allowances, Imperial Physician Lin?"

"No. Things are fine." Lin Qingyu looked at Xiao Jie. "You're just letting him sleep like that, Steward Xi? Even though it's summer now, the nights can be a bit chilly. His Highness mustn't fall sick at this time."

"Please wait here for a bit, Imperial Physician Lin."

Xi Rong walked over to Xiao Jie, bent down, and lifted the prince in his arms. Startled awake, Xiao Jie was greeted by the sight of Xi Rong's face. "A-Rong," he mumbled groggily.

"I'm carrying you to your bedchambers," Xi Rong said gently.

Xiao Jie nodded, then looped his arms around Xi Rong's neck and closed his eyes again.

After Xiao Jie was settled, Xi Rong returned to the ancillary palace. "I'm sorry for making you wait," he told Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu had already drunk half of his tea. "What pressing matters do you wish to discuss, Steward Xi? You may begin."

Both Lin Qingyu and Xi Rong had gotten what they needed from their alliance. After working together so long, they no longer beat around the bush like before. "The prince has been ruling the nation for a while now," Xi Rong remarked. "I wonder whether you're satisfied with his performance, Imperial Physician Lin?"

"Now, this is an interesting question," Lin Qingyu replied. "But it should be put to the emperor, not me."

"Who do you think should do that, then, Imperial Physician Lin?" Xi Rong asked, smiling.

Lin Qingyu looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“We need someone to come forward. It would be best if they were a civil official the emperor trusts deeply—someone who isn’t too close either the crown prince or the prince of Ning,” Xi Rong said. “The emperor’s sickness is worsening; with each passing day, he’s lucid less and less. Nonetheless, I hope that, while he’s conscious, the emperor can bestow a title befitting the prince of Ning upon him. Intelligent as you are, Imperial Physician Lin, I believe you understand what I mean.”

“After lying in wait for so many years, why have you lost your patience now?” Lin Qingyu asked slowly.

Wearing a set of resplendent robes, the eunuch Xi Rong looked like a man born into nobility; his bearing was more princely than Xiao Jie’s. “It’s precisely because I’ve waited too long that I don’t wish to do so any longer.”

“Haste makes waste,” Lin Qingyu replied. “You should be patient, Steward Xi. No need to rush.”

Xi Rong bowed to him, the picture of humility and deference. “Very well. You have my thanks, Physician Lin.”

Having spent ages conceiving this intricate plan, Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou were now just one step short of realizing their goal. Meanwhile, Xi Rong merely wanted an imperial edict that acknowledged Xiao Jie as the successor to the throne.

That wouldn’t be difficult. Anyone with eyes could see that the crown prince’s cohort was no longer able to influence the imperial court. And even if the emperor decided not to remove Xiao Cheng from the position of crown prince out of affection for his son, Xiao Cheng’s worsening health meant that he wouldn’t remain in power for long. Even if the emperor died before the crown prince, and Xiao Cheng took the throne, how could a new emperor on death’s door possibly remain the leader of this majestic empire? Turning the tides would take one last thing—for someone to bring the topic of appointing another crown prince to the fore.

Gu Fuzhou—whom all military officials followed—could do so. However, the slightest misstep could result in the accusation that he was staging a coup. Words were powerful in their own right, and as nonchalant

as Lin Qingyu was when it came to anyone else, he couldn't tolerate seeing the public condemn his husband. So the best candidate was none other than the marquess of Nan'an, who'd suggested that Xiao Jie be made prince of Ning. Xi Rong was indirectly telling Lin Qingyu to have the marquess of Nan'an submit a memorial to the emperor calling for the appointment of another crown prince.

Xi Rong's eagerness made his ambitions clear, but Lin Qingyu didn't feel like speeding things up. Even though Xiao Jie was now ruling the nation, Lin Qingyu had both Gu Fuzhou and the empress on his side, and he also had the sickly emperor under his control. His party and Xi Rong's were equally matched in terms of their power, which was the only reason Xi Rong had the nerve to tell Lin Qingyu what to do. If Xiao Jie was made crown prince and went on to accumulate enough power and resources, Lin Qingyu would only be able to dream of having equal standing with him and Xi Rong.

But he and Gu Fuzhou hadn't executed all their schemes to dethrone the emperor and crown prince for Xiao Jie and Xi Rong's benefit.

Lin Qingyu set down his cup. "I'm not done yet, so what are you thanking me for?"

Xi Rong raised his eyebrows. "What do you have in mind, Imperial Physician Lin?"

"I can give His Highness a title that befits him, but I have three conditions."

"Please state them to me, Imperial Physician Lin."

"First, I want the token belonging to the commander of the Tianji Guard."

Xi Rong's expression shifted. "And then?" he asked with an insincere smile.

"Second, I want Great General Gu to command the imperial guards alongside the Iron Cavalry," Lin Qingyu said. "Third, should His Highness successfully ascend to the throne, the current reigning empress—the future empress dowager—is to rule the nation behind the curtain."

The remnants of Xi Rong's smile disappeared from his face. "If you're so ambitious, Imperial Physician Lin, why not be emperor yourself?" he responded slowly.

"You just called me 'Imperial Physician Lin,' didn't you?" Lin Qingyu replied. "How could an imperial physician possibly become the noblest man in this nation?"

Xi Rong scoffed. "I don't think you mean that, Imperial Physician Lin."

"Now that we've told each other what we want directly, Steward Xi, you and His Highness can mull my conditions over before giving me an answer," Lin Qingyu said. "But I advise you not to let the general and me wait for too long. The longer this drags on, the more uncertainties may arise. What if the emperor wakes up from his coma one day?"

Xi Rong saw Lin Qingyu to the door. Suddenly, he said, "Please stay, Imperial Physician Lin. I want to hear both your and the general's opinions about a certain matter."

"What is it?"

"Now that Princess Jingchun's identity has been exposed, should the imperial court take action against the North Kingdom before it can strike? Great Yu's sole king—the only such ruler from outside the royal family—remains a hidden threat to the nation."

"That's not necessary. The imperial court is short on manpower and rations, so we'll just focus on the war in the northwest," Lin Qingyu replied. "So long as Jingchun is by the North King's side, the North Kingdom will never attack the imperial court."

"How do you know that, Imperial Physician Lin?"

Lin Qingyu said nothing. He'd once asked Gu Fuzhou the same question, and Gu Fuzhou had given him this answer: "If Xiao Cheng and Shen Huaishi's story is a bucket of angsty getting-back-together romance slop that disgusts whoever consumes it, then the North King and Jingchun's story is fluffy, a cookie that's sweet from beginning to end. To them, their relationship matters more than anything."

Chapter 83

XI RONG DIDN'T TAKE TOO LONG to give Lin Qingyu an answer: He agreed to Lin Qingyu's three conditions. He had the Tianji Guard token delivered to the general's residence, then appointed Gu Fuzhou chief commander of the imperial guards in the name of the prince of Ning, the nation's acting regent. The chief commander oversaw the safety of the capital and the palace.

"He agreed a bit too readily, didn't he?" Gu Fuzhou rapped the desk with the token. "That's unlike him."

Lin Qingyu agreed. "He must've put due precautions in place."

When he'd given Xi Rong those three conditions, he hadn't expected the eunuch to agree to them. Xi Rong was an ambitious man; he'd never allow Xiao Jie to be threatened and obstructed by other parties during the prince's imminent reign. Thus, Xi Rong had agreed to those conditions for one reason: He and Xiao Jie had yet to establish their foothold and couldn't yet operate without Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou's support. When the time was ripe to drop their temporary allies, he could always think of something.

"Haven't you taken precautions too?" responded Gu Fuzhou. "'If Xiao Jie and Xi Rong refuse to listen, we'll just replace them with someone else'—that was what you told me."

Lin Qingyu's gaze fell on the token that allowed one to command all the elite assassins in the Tianji Guard. "The emperor has few living sons. If Xiao Cheng was dealt with and Xiao Jie removed, only one son would remain."

Gu Fuzhou tapped out a rhythmic beat with the token, yawning. "Having an idiot be emperor would be pretty ridiculous."

"I don't want to do something that ridiculous, either. Let's hope Xi Rong is obedient enough that we aren't forced to remove them. And stop that." Lin Qingyu was exasperated. "Are you so overactive that you have to fiddle with something at every single moment?"

Gu Fuzhou stopped, but put on a show of being wronged. “Aren’t we a loving couple? Why the scolding, Physician Lin?”

“You *are* overactive—it’s the truth,” Lin Qingyu said, amused. “Why are you taking it as a scolding?”

“Of course I’m bored and looking for something to fiddle with,” Gu Fuzhou said nonchalantly. “*You* don’t spend time with me—you’re fixated on playing with your medicines and scheming all day. You should take some time off and play with my feelings too, Physician Lin. Oh—speaking of that, I’m green with envy over that love-brained couple in the North Kingdom.”

Lin Qingyu kept himself busy dealing with multiple factions, which gave him no time to play with Jiang-gongzi’s feelings. Having been excused from the morning court meetings, Gu Fuzhou didn’t need to enter the palace often. On the other hand, Lin Qingyu made the trip there every day. When he was swamped with work, he even stayed the night at the Department of Imperial Physicians. Gu Fuzhou had been the bunk bed’s only occupant for a while, so of course he had some complaints ready.

“Why? Do you want to be love-brained too?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Gu Fuzhou shrugged. “You don’t like people with love on the brain, so why would I want to be one? I want to be the type of mature man you like, Physician Lin.”

“I don’t like lazy men who lie there like salted fish, yet I don’t see you working harder,” Lin Qingyu jested.

“The greatest beauty of Great Yu has fallen in love with me despite my laziness. That’s called skill.” Gu Fuzhou wasn’t ashamed in the slightest. Quite the opposite—he was proud of himself. “You’ve already fallen in love with me. Isn’t it too late to regret it?”

Lin Qingyu sighed softly. “A misjudgment on my part.”

Gu Fuzhou beamed. “Don’t say that. I’m lazy, yes, but I support your career. Just do whatever you want without worry or reservations, and if something bad happens, come to me. I’ll help you deal with the aftermath.”

“So if nothing bad has happened, I can’t come to you?” Lin Qingyu asked. “Didn’t you say that you were bored? If that’s the case, I have a

massive heap of important tasks I can entrust to you.”

“No thanks.” Gu Fuzhou slumped forward on the desk, waving his hand. “I’d rather loaf around at home until mold grows on me than do an important task, unless I’m doing it for your sake.”

Lin Qingyu reached up, his fingertips lightly grazing the thin scar on Gu Fuzhou’s temple. “I’ll only have time to play with your feelings if you properly complete these tasks for me.”

Gu Fuzhou arched a brow. “Really? Write me a pledge, then.”

Lin Qingyu let out an involuntary chuckle. “How would you like me to do that?”

Gu Fuzhou handed him a brush and paper. “Write that after everything is settled, you’ll stay with me in the residence for a whole day. And ‘a whole day’ means twenty-four hours—not even one minute less.”

***

A few days later, both civil and military officials noticed that the palace guards had quietly been replaced. Most of them now had unfamiliar faces. They patrolled the vicinity from nightfall to daybreak, guarding the eight main gates, the twelve palaces, and the departmental offices. Some people asked around, curious, and learned that Great General Gu had personally handpicked these new imperial guards. They were all unfailingly loyal to him.

Meanwhile, the elderly eunuch Xue Ying—who’d served the emperor for years—suddenly retired and returned to his hometown. After that, the eunuchs and maids in the emperor’s bedchambers were all replaced, and Eunuch Laifu of Fengyi Palace was appointed acting head eunuch.

The empress attended the emperor all day, but other consorts, concubines, and princesses who wished to do likewise were rejected on the grounds that the emperor needed to recuperate in peace, and thus wasn’t fit to receive visitors. Aside from those working in Fengyi Palace, the only other person who saw the emperor was Lin Qingyu, an imperial physician.

Everyone could tell that a drastic change was coming to the palace.

Today, Great General Gu, who hadn’t attended a court meeting for some time, visited the Ministry of Revenue with his wife. They were welcomed by the current minister of revenue, the marquess of Nan’an. Within the group of civil officials, Gu Fuzhou’s military uniform stood out, even without taking into consideration the saber sheathed at his waist.

Gu Fuzhou dismissed everyone aside from the marquess of Nan’an, who asked fearfully, “May I know why Great General Gu has blessed the Ministry of Revenue with his presence?”

Throughout his decades-long tenure, the marquess of Nan’an had never participated in political infighting; he was loyal only to the emperor. In return, the emperor alone backed him. Now that the emperor had fallen seriously ill, the marquess’s only supporter was in a precarious state, which made him more cautious when dealing with others. That way, regardless of who the new emperor would be—the current crown prince, or the prince of Ning—he could retain his wealth and power.

The man Gu Fuzhou had once called “Father” was now treating him warily, as though stepping on thin ice. That amused Gu Fuzhou a little. “Don’t you see my wife, Marquess? Why didn’t you greet him?”

The marquess of Nan’an froze. He—a first-rank marquess—was being asked to greet the mere imperial physician who’d also been his late son’s male wife!

“Let’s get down to business, General,” Lin Qingyu said.

“All right,” Gu Fuzhou agreed. “I’ve come to you for answers regarding something I don’t understand, Marquess.”

“Please tell me about it,” the marquess said.

Speaking was far too taxing, so Gu Fuzhou let Lin Qingyu handle it. “Go on, my wife.”

“Noble Consort Chen has been stripped of her title,” Lin Qingyu said, “and both the emperor and the crown prince have fallen seriously ill, leaving the prince of Ning to rule the nation. The general is curious about why none of the civil officials have come forward to state their stance under these circumstances.”

The marquess of Nan’an’s heart stuttered; he’d long anticipated that this would eventually fall to him. Lin Qingyu’s intentions were now clear. Back when Lin Qingyu had threatened him with the exposure of the marchioness’s involvement in a private salt business, the marquess had thought that the fourth prince merely wanted to be prince of Ning. In retrospect, though, Lin Qingyu had set everything up a long time ago, waiting to ensnare the marquess in his trap.

“The prime minister is above any civil official,” the marquess of Nan’an said coldly. “Since Prime Minister Cui hasn’t stated his stance yet, it’s not my place to speak up.”

Lin Qingyu wasn’t convinced. “There’s a simple solution. Talk to Prime Minister Cui about this, and you can cowrite a memorial and submit it under both your names.”

“My wife is right,” Gu Fuzhou said.

The marquess of Nan’an seemed troubled. “Ah…what would you like us to write in that memorial, Great General?”

Gu Fuzhou gripped his saber hilt in what seemed like a casual gesture. “Considering how sharp you are, Marquess, I don’t think I need to say it outright.”

The marquess of Nan’an wiped sweat away. Summoning his courage, he said, “Noble Consort Chen made a serious blunder, but the crown prince wasn’t involved, and His Majesty hasn’t shown any desire to strip the crown prince of his title. If we submit a memorial asking that the emperor do so just because the crown prince is bedridden and the prince of Ning is ruling the nation, wouldn’t it be incredibly fickle and disloyal?”

“You’re jesting, Marquess,” Lin Qingyu responded. “How could we be ‘fickle and disloyal’ just because of that? The great general merely wishes you to act as the situation calls for.”

Gu Fuzhou nodded. “You’re very right, my wife.”

The marquess was stunned. “Act as the situation calls for? But…”

“Submitting that memorial a few months ago already put you on the prince’s boat. Back then, the fourth prince didn’t yet have any achievements under his belt, nor did he have the emperor’s favor, but you lent him a

helping hand. His Highness has always been grateful to you, Marquess. Now that His Highness's accomplishments are considerable, and he's favored by the public, are you sure that you want to get off the prince's boat, Marquess? Shouldn't you help him again, and become the one *steering* the boat?"

The marquess's gaze wavered. He seemed convinced.

"As long as you can help His Highness gain favor, so that this palace's many civil officials and censors can be useful to him, he can make you more than just the minister of revenue," Lin Qingyu continued. "He can even bestow the title of prime minister upon you."

Just when the marquess was about to acquiesce—albeit with hesitation—Gu Fuzhou's words pushed him to make up his mind. "Think of it this way: You'll be doing it for the glory of the Lu family. And for your infant son, who isn't even a year old."

The marquess of Nan'an exhaled. "I'll deal with the civil officials for His Highness."

A memorial written by the marquess of Nan'an, and signed by multiple officials, was soon delivered to the emperor's bedchambers. Lin Qingyu presented it to the empress. "You may check to see whether anything needs to be corrected, Your Majesty."

The empress read the memorial. "It looks fine."

"I'll rouse the emperor, then."

For the first time in days, Lin Qingyu administered acupuncture to the comatose emperor. The emperor stirred with difficulty, looking toward the side of the bed with murky eyes. "My empress…"

"Your Majesty," the empress said gently. "You're awake."

The emperor's fingers twitched. "Where's the imperial physician?" he asked in a hoarse, gritty voice.

"I'm here, Your Majesty," Lin Qingyu said.

The thick fragrance of an unknown incense filled the room. The emperor turned to Lin Qingyu, his face gradually turning slack.

“I woke you up because I need you to do something,” Lin Qingyu murmured softly, as though speaking to a child. “Can you do it for me, Your Majesty?”

The emperor nodded woodenly.

Lin Qingyu smiled. “How obedient.”

He looked up at Laifu beside him. Laifu immediately carried over a small table, setting it in front of the bed. The empress helped the emperor up and handed him the imperial brush. Once everything was ready, Laifu presented them with the emperor’s jade seal. The empress held the emperor’s hand in hers and pressed the seal onto the imperial edict. After that was done, the emperor fell into his coma again.

The empress covered him with a blanket impassively, murmuring to herself, “Don’t blame me for this, Your Majesty. Blame yourself. If you’d shown Li-er the slightest affection, I wouldn’t have taken such measures. You have so many princes and princesses, yet I only have Li-er. I just want to reunite with my son—why are you so against it? Even if Li-er is simpleminded, he’s your son. So why…?” She broke down sobbing.

Lin Qingyu tucked the imperial edict away. “Your Majesty, the sixth prince is awaiting you in Jinyang Palace.”

The empress wiped her tears expressionlessly. “The emperor once said that Jinyang Palace, which is warm during winter and cool during summer, is a good place for the sick to recuperate, so he had Li-er grow up there. If you ask me, the third prince Xiao Cheng could be moved into Jinyang Palace for that reason once he moves out of the Eastern Palace. If nothing happens…he doesn’t ever need to come back here.”

Lin Qingyu nodded gently. “I understand, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 84

THE IMPERIAL CENSORS WROTE countless memorials denouncing Crown Prince Xiao Cheng. When spring turned into summer, he was stripped of his title for numerous offenses, including disobeying ancestral laws, usurping authority, and illegally recruiting officials to his side.

Next came an edict from the emperor of Great Yu: *Our fourth son, the prince of Ning, greatly resembles us in his steadfastness, humility, and virtue. Here we announce to our ancestors and to the public our bestowal of the conferral document upon him, naming him crown prince, successor to the empire, and master of the Eastern Palace.*

Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou attended the conferral ceremony in the palace. Even standing under the scorching sun for half a day left Lin Qingyu mostly unaffected; he looked as beautiful and cold as usual. Gu Fuzhou, on the other hand, was half dead after being exposed to the sun, his court robes already soaked in sweat. The “feeble” outsider, who couldn’t handle day after day of hot weather, swiftly stripped off his thick, heavy court robes the moment he got back to his residence. Wearing only the garments he’d sleep in, he slumped back on a lounge chair and said nothing for a long time.

Only after Huantong brought over a bucket of ice and Hualu gave him a bunch of red grapes soaked overnight in well water did he finally recover.

While Gu Fuzhou sat in a daze because of the heat, Lin Qingyu had already changed into simple white robes. He sat beside the table, holding a jade fan, as he talked to Huantong about that day’s dinner. The colors of the summertime sunset dancing on his skin created a serene picture.

Flames crackled in Gu Fuzhou’s heart. He yearned to go over and tease Lin Qingyu, but he’d already stood for six hours that day; even moving a finger seemed exhausting. He would die the moment he left his chair.

“Have the kitchens make a pot of barley congee, prepare some appetizing pickled vegetables, and stir-fry two seasonal vegetables,” Lin Qingyu directed.

Huantong committed all that to memory. “You really don’t want any meat at all, Young Master? The great general has meat with every meal.”

Lin Qingyu thought about it, then replied, “Have them braise some pork ribs in soy paste. And once the meal is prepared, just deliver it here.”

“All right,” Huantong said. “I’ll have the kitchens start on it immediately.”

No senior family members lived in this residence, and its master, Gu Fuzhou, set an example that led Lin Qingyu to slack off on etiquette. When he had no tasks to attend to, he slept in with Gu Fuzhou, and he had his meals delivered to their bedroom when Gu Fuzhou couldn’t be bothered to eat in the front room. On this rare, idyllic day, Lin Qingyu didn’t read, brew medicine, or rear gu creatures; instead, he lazed around and did nothing with Gu Fuzhou. He never thought that would happen. If this went on, Gu Fuzhou would lead him astray and make him a lazy man.

Lin Qingyu turned back and leveled a glance at Gu Fuzhou, who didn’t move a muscle as he lay in his chair. Lin Qingyu’s brow creased slightly. “How long have you been lying there? Shouldn’t you go change your clothes?”

Gu Fuzhou pointed toward the table. “Qingyu, I want grapes,” he drawled. The red grapes weren’t far out of Gu Fuzhou’s reach; if he straightened up, he could have pinched one in his fingers.

With a resigned expression, Lin Qingyu walked over to pluck a red grape from the bunch. “Don’t eat too many of them. We’re having dinner soon.”

Gu Fuzhou blinked. “Feed it to me…”

Narrowing his eyes, Lin Qingyu crammed the fruit into Gu Fuzhou’s mouth. “Go die of laziness and see if I care.”

The red grapes were sweet and juicy, and cooling them in well water countered the heat effectively. As Lin Qingyu tried to retract his hand, the satisfied Gu Fuzhou grabbed his wrist, then pulled him into his arms.

Pulled down to sit in the lazy general's lap, Lin Qingyu eyed him with a knife-sharp gaze but nonetheless didn't break free. "Why, has your stamina returned?"

"I may not have enough stamina for anything else, but I'm always up to hugging my wife." Gu Fuzhou plucked a grape and fed it to Lin Qingyu. After Lin Qingyu took it into his mouth, the general added, "Xiao Jie has taken the crown prince's seat, and Xi Rong hasn't gotten out of line yet. Does that mean you can rest for now?"

"There's no end to scheming. As long as your heart is in it, you'll never be able to rest," Lin Qingyu said.

"You're right—there's no end to scheming. But there *is* an end to your husband's lifespan." Gu Fuzhou refused to behave, even with Lin Qingyu in his lap. His palm lingered on Lin Qingyu's slender waist, stroking it up and down. "I'm already in my thirties. If you wait until you're done with *everything* to spend time with me, I won't have the energy to do anything to you, even if my heart is in it. When that happens, what are we going to do? Will you take me out plaza dancing,[20] or will we burrow into our blankets and do nothing but chat?"

Gu Fuzhou's caresses tickled Lin Qingyu. "What's plaza dancing?"

Hualu carried their dinner into the room only to see her young master settled on the great general's lap, listening intently as the general described a beautiful dance of exotic origin. Boundless emotions surged in her heart. She'd served the young master for so long, but she'd never known that he had this side; he sat tucked in his husband's arms, his expression gentle.

Young Master was always happy when he was by the great general's side; that was something Young Marquess Lu had never been able to give him. When he and Young Marquess Lu became husband and wife, Young Master hadn't been kind at first. Later, he softened and accepted the young marquess—but his brow had always been creased with worry that couldn't be wiped away, because he knew that the young marquess only had a year to live. Even when he was happy, a shadow always lurked beneath.

But now that he was by Great General Gu's side, he would eventually recover from that shadow—however dark it had once been.

All of a sudden, Hualu came to terms with her feelings. She no longer felt upset for the late young marquess, and she no longer resented the great general for taking the young master away. After all…the young master really did look beautiful with his guard down and a genuine smile on his face.

Still holding the tray of food, she almost bumped into Huantong, who held a jug of sweet flag wine.

“Why’d you come back out?” Huantong asked.

Hualu blushed. “Young Master and the great general don’t have time to eat dinner yet, so I’ll deliver it later. Today’s so hot; it would be better to let the congee cool down anyway.”

Inside the room, Gu Fuzhou kept babbling on and on. Then, meeting Lin Qingyu’s gaze, he suddenly realized that he was being foolish by earnestly telling Lin Qingyu about plaza dancing right now. Cutting his losses before it was too late, he changed the topic. “Anyway, since things are done for now, you should make good on your promise. You aren’t allowed to go to the palace and the Department of Imperial Physicians tomorrow. Stay at home with me for the whole day.” Lin Qingyu was about to say something when Gu Fuzhou added, “You wrote a pledge.”

Lin Qingyu smiled. “Got it. And a whole day means twenty-four hours—not even one minute less.”

Gu Fuzhou beamed and leaned in to kiss him. Lin Qingyu pushed him away. “You haven’t gone to take a bath yet, and you sweated buckets earlier.”

Hearing the words “take a bath,” Gu Fuzhou felt exhaustion overcome him. “Help. I don’t want to wash my hair.”

“It’s so hot today that your hair will dry in no time,” Lin Qingyu said.

“Hair-washing is still annoying. I want to cut my hair short, Qingyu. Can I?”

“Cut your hair short?” Lin Qingyu was surprised. “How short?”

Gu Fuzhou made a pinching gesture with his thumb and index finger, the pads of the two digits almost pressing. “This short.”

After consideration, Lin Qingyu suggested, “Perhaps you should just become a monk?”

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The next day, Lin Qingyu didn’t go anywhere, as he’d promised. He also told Yuan Yin that they wouldn’t welcome any visitors that day.

Gu Fuzhou slept until noon, as usual, then had lunch with Lin Qingyu. Afternoon was the hottest time of the day, so they cooled their room with ice and stayed inside it.

Gu Fuzhou suddenly felt an urge to start a discussion about music with Lin Qingyu. Not only was Lin Qingyu a master of medicine, he’d also devoted time to learning music, weiqi, calligraphy, and painting. Gu Fuzhou wanted to see him play an instrument, so he had Huantong head to the storerooms to retrieve a yaoqin.[21] Not knowing which instrument Lin Qingyu wanted, Huantong carried over a whole box of qin Lin Qingyu had played.

Gu Fuzhou picked up a xiqin.[22] “This is an erhu, isn’t it?”

“An erhu?” Lin Qingyu repeated. “In Great Yu, we call that instrument a xiqin.”

“I know how to play this,” Gu Fuzhou said, his interest piqued. “When I was a kid, my dear mother forced me to learn two instruments, one foreign and one classic. The xiqin was the latter.”

“Why do I feel like you were forced to learn everything you know by your mother?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“You’re right. Thank goodness for her, or I would have woken up in Great Yu not even knowing how to write with a brush.” Gu Fuzhou chuckled softly. “How could I have been in a relationship with you in that case?”

Lin Qingyu noticed the tendril of homesickness in Gu Fuzhou’s eyes but had no idea how to comfort him. Gu Fuzhou’s hometown was too distant—so distant that he’d never get to return there.

Lin Qingyu gazed downward, plucking the strings softly. “What tune would you like me to play?”

Gu Fuzhou laughed. “I’ll use this xiqin to play a tune with you, Qingyu. How does that sound?”

Lin Qingyu smiled. “Very well.”

Their duet-playing was utterly unsynchronized and chaotic; it tortured Huantong and Hualu for hours. Both servants wound up giving the room a wide berth.

When the sun set, Gu Fuzhou dragged Lin Qingyu over to the pond to fish.

Now that Gu Fuzhou had spent so much time in Great Yu, fishing had become his favorite sport. It required no effort, and on top of that, he got to enjoy the delight of catching something. Wasn’t that much better than basketball or tennis?

While Gu Fuzhou fished, Lin Qingyu sat beside him, feeding him pieces of fresh-cut fruit now and then. Meanwhile, several female servants in the distance spotted them; they walked up and bowed. “Greetings, General, Lady.”

Each woman held a woven grass basket brimming with wide bamboo leaves.

“Are you going to make zongzi?” Gu Fuzhou asked.

“Yes, we are. The Dragon Boat Festival is coming up, and we want to wash the leaves and glutinous rice before then,” one woman replied with a smile. “We didn’t expect to interrupt you, General.”

“You aren’t interrupting us,” Lin Qingyu said. “Zongzi… How do you make those?”

Gu Fuzhou was stunned.

The servant withdrew a bamboo leaf from a basket and deposited a handful of glutinous rice atop it. “You do this, then this…and last, flip it over and tie it with string.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “I’ll give it a try.”

He was indifferent to fishing, so sitting beside Gu Fuzhou had quickly become boring. Thus, he'd found himself something to do.

Wrapping zongzi looked simple, but—unexpectedly—Lin Qingyu struggled to get the hang of it. After several failed attempts, he lost his patience.

Gu Fuzhou craned his neck to look. "As they say, quality ingredients only need simple cooking methods. And after keeping himself busy for an hour wrapping zongzi, Physician Lin has opted to leave everything to the servants." His voice was warm with lighthearted amusement in the summertime evening.

Lin Qingyu wiped his hands dry. "Shut up," he commanded stonily.

At that moment, Yuan Yin found them. "General, Lady, a messenger visited the residence just now."

"I told you that we won't be welcoming any visitors today," Lin Qingyu said.

"But the messenger came bearing this." Yuan Yin withdrew a jewel—the same one Lin Qingyu had given Shen Huaishi.

"Where's the message?" Lin Qingyu asked. "Hand it over."

Shen Huaishi was as succinct as ever. *Meet me in Jinxiu Pavilion,* said his note.

"I didn't expect that Shen Huaishi would still be in the capital," Lin Qingyu remarked.

Gu Fuzhou read the message over Lin Qingyu's shoulder. "Twenty-four hours—you promised," he reminded his wife. "It doesn't count if it's even a minute less than that."

"Then I won't go," Lin Qingyu said.

Gu Fuzhou laughed aloud as he took in his wife's slight hesitation. "Did you really not see that I was joking?"

Lin Qingyu was stunned. "Joking?" He indeed *hadn't* seen that.

"If Shen Huaishi's asked to meet you now, it must be about a serious matter that needs your attention," Gu Fuzhou pointed out. "How could I possibly stop you from meeting him?"

His words made Lin Qingyu more certain of his choice. “I’m not going,” he insisted. “I promised you that I’d stay at home with you the whole day, and a virtuous man always keeps promises.”

“Cut that out. Since when are you virtuous?” Gu Fuzhou laughed. “What you are is a villain who lies effortlessly, never says what he means, and takes revenge on anyone who dares cross him.”

“So that’s how you’ve always seen me, General,” Lin Qingyu responded slowly. He had lied to many people—but never to Gu Fuzhou.

“What a coincidence—I happen to like great beauties who lie.”

But Gu Fuzhou’s glib words never worked on Lin Qingyu. “You don’t like ‘great beauties who lie,’ General. You just like pretty faces.” In other words, his face was still what Gu Fuzhou liked most about him.

“You can’t say that. I like great beauties who lie because *you* lie.” Gu Fuzhou set his palms on Lin Qingyu’s shoulders, then strode forward, pushing Lin Qingyu along. “All right—just go. The novel’s protagonist is waiting for you. Come back quickly when you’re finished.”

“You…” Lin Qingyu trailed off, acquiescing with resignation. “I can walk by myself.”

Gu Fuzhou saw Lin Qingyu out of the residence. After he left, the general chuckled to himself. He stretched his arms out and went back to his room for a nap.

Chapter 85

ONCE HE'D CHANGED, Lin Qingyu took a carriage to Jinxiu Pavilion.

As the best-known restaurant in the capital, Jinxiu Pavilion was always lively and bustling, not a table empty, except in special circumstances like periods of national mourning. Lin Qingyu had thought that Shen Huaishi would be in the capital, but not that he'd arrange for them to meet at Jinxiu Pavilion. He'd ordered the Tianji Guard to stop hunting Shen Huaishi, but Shen Huaishi himself probably didn't know that yet. To show up on the streets of the capital… Was he *that* confident in his own skills?

The edict deposing the crown prince had been announced, so Shen Huaishi was most likely looking for Lin Qingyu now because of Xiao Cheng. Lin Qingyu had to admit that he was looking forward to it.

At Jinxiu Pavilion, Lin Qingyu asked the owner for a private room on the second floor and a pot of tea. Then he sat by the window, drinking tea and watching the continuous flow of people on the street. Yongxing Street was as busy as ever; the cries of the stall vendors and expressions of the pedestrians as they rushed by were no different from usual. The emperor's serious illness and the change of ruler seemed not to impact the ordinary citizens. And if this was the case in the capital, it would naturally be like this in other areas as well. Whoever the crown prince was, whoever sat on the dragon throne, and whoever held the imperial brush and ruled the nation, the citizens had to carry on with their lives.

Soon, a quiet knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," said Lin Qingyu.

A man entered, wearing a wide-brimmed hat with a veil that hung down and blocked his face. Lin Qingyu had Huantong go wait outside, and the man removed his hat, revealing a plain face that would be forgotten in a second.

"I didn't think I'd see you again so soon," said Lin Qingyu.

Shen Huaishi gave him a small smile. “Physician Lin.”

If Shen Huaishi could still smile, he probably wasn’t there to demand answers. Rolling up his sleeves, Lin Qingyu pointed to the seat across from him. “Sit.”

Shen Huaishi sat down. He seemed a little awkward but mostly calm.

“Why did you ask to meet here?” asked Lin Qingyu. “Haven’t we always met at Changsheng Temple?”

“I’m leaving the capital, and I don’t know when I’ll see you again,” Shen Huaishi replied, his gaze lowered. “I wanted to drink with you before I leave.”

The man’s honest appearance made Lin Qingyu’s chest twinge a bit uncomfortably. He and Shen Huaishi had known each other for a long time, but when they met, it had been either at the Imperial Academy of Medicine or Changsheng Temple. They’d never sat across from each other at a table with a pot of good tea, as they were doing right now.

In the past, Lin Qingyu had treated Shen Huaishi as a pawn, and there was no need for a player and a game piece to drink together. Now that Xiao Cheng had fallen, Shen Huaishi wasn’t so much as a piece Lin Qingyu could move, so why was he wasting time here instead of spending it with his husband?

“Why do you want to drink with me?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Shen Huaishi looked up. “Because I think of you as a friend.”

Lin Qingyu couldn’t hold back a smile, which stunned Shen Huaishi for a moment. “And your eyes really do look like Jingchun’s,” he added.

“So you think of me as a substitute for Jingchun too?” Lin Qingyu joked.

Shen Huaishi denied it. “No. You’re beautiful…more so than Jingchun. And your personalities are completely different. I wouldn’t confuse you two. But you treated my injuries, found Zhu-dage for me, and told me what happened back then. I’m very thankful to you.”

“Did you stay behind in the capital because you didn’t believe me, and thought that I’d do something to Jingchun?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“It’s not that I didn’t believe you,” Shen Huaishi said, defending himself with difficulty. “It’s just that…”

“If you care so much about Jingchun, why didn’t you go visit him in the north?”

Shen Huaishi shook his head. “He should be living well there. I didn’t want to bother him.”

Lin Qingyu observed him for a bit, then asked, “What wine would you like to drink?”

A hint of joy appeared on Shen Huaishi lifeless face, which finally gained some color. “We can have whatever you like.”

Shen Huaishi didn’t mention Xiao Cheng. It was as if he really just wanted to drink with Lin Qingyu. Lin Qingyu ordered a pot of the restaurant’s signature bamboo wine, along with a few dishes that he recalled were good. Shen Huaishi wasn’t much good at chatting; he rarely spoke unless absolutely necessary. Lin Qingyu wasn’t talkative either, and he mostly conversed with Gu Fuzhou. Thus, they ate their meal in silence.

When they finished, Shen Huaishi picked up his cup. “Once we go our separate ways today, we’ll be in different corners of the world, far from each other. Take care, Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu raised his cup and took a sip. “Where are you planning to go? Back to that fishing village in Southern Yue?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Shen Huaishi said in a slightly self-deprecating tone. “But, in this vast world, I’m certain a place for me exists somewhere.”

“Letting your mastery of martial arts go to waste would be a pity. Still, don’t I imagine that you’re interested in returning to the Tianji Guard,” Lin Qingyu said. He paused. “Perhaps you’d like to work for me and the general?”

Lin Qingyu’s invitation was far beyond anything Shen Huaishi had expected. “You mean…for Great General Gu?”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “The general is in charge of the imperial palace guards and the capital’s Iron Cavalry battalion. Finding you a position wouldn’t be difficult—and haven’t you always admired the general?”

Recovering from his shock, Shen Huaishi smiled. “Thank you for your kindness, Physician Lin. It’s true that I admire the general, but I don’t want to stay in the capital.”

Lin Qingyu mulled that over. “So you’re still thinking of running away.”

“No. I just want to live a peaceful life.”

Lin Qingyu scoffed. “If you’d really let go of everything, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

Shen Huaishi pursed his lips, falling silent.

After a pause, Lin Qingyu continued, “Huaishi, the ‘truth’ Zhu Yongxin told you that day wasn’t the full story.”

Shen Huaishi’s pupils constricted. “What?”

“It’s true that Xiao Cheng was responsible for the Tianyu Sect’s destruction. However, he stopped at the last moment,” Lin Qingyu said. “The emperor had a backup plan, though—when the crown prince relented, the emperor ordered the elite Tianji Guard to eliminate everyone in the Tianyu Sect in the guise of the Chiya Sect. Xiao Cheng exerted a lot of effort to save your life. Still, he did plan the incident with the Tianyu Sect, and he deceived you for years. To me, he’s no different from the true culprit, the emperor. But perhaps you’ll feel differently.”

Shen Huaishi’s face paled. “How come you’re suddenly telling me the truth?”

“Didn’t you say that I’m a friend?” Lin Qingyu asked calmly. “I don’t make a habit of lying to friends.”

The key reason he was willing to tell Shen Huaishi the truth, of course, was that they’d defeated Xiao Cheng. He didn’t even know how long the former crown prince had left to live, and it would be impossible for him to make a comeback. The truth wasn’t very important under such circumstances.

Shen Huaishi was silent, but he was taking deeper breaths.

Lin Qingyu studied his expression and snorted. “What—do you regret stabbing Xiao Cheng now?”

When Shen Huaishi spoke again, his voice was hoarse. “Why did you lie to me?”

“I was afraid you’d be too soft otherwise,” Lin Qingyu said honestly.

A strange laugh came from Shen Huaishi’s throat. “To you, am I…so lowly?”

“Are you not?”

Shen Huaishi choked. He suddenly stood, his hands clenching into fists. “I-I’m leaving.”

From behind him, Lin Qingyu said, “I’m very sorry that I lied to you, but I don’t regret it. If you’d known that Xiao Cheng relented at one point, you would have spared his life. I wasn’t just afraid that you wouldn’t hurt him, but that you’d even forgive him, and that you’d keep warming his bed and risking your life for him…”

The undisguised contempt in Lin Qingyu’s tone seemed to stab at Shen Huaishi’s heart. His eyes grew bloodshot as he shouted, “I wouldn’t!”

Lin Qingyu put down his cup. “Then show me.”

“What do you want me to do?” Shen Huaishi almost growled.

“Xiao Cheng is recovering in Jinyang Palace. I can let you see him one more time.”

“See him…” Shen Huaishi said hoarsely.

“If you did, would you want to kill him and avenge the Tianyu Sect? Or would you let him live so that you could continue your relationship with him? Or perhaps you would let him live as he is now, not yet dead but barely alive, watching you fall in love with others: powerless, and your prisoner for life. I can help you achieve anything—just give me the word.” Lin Qingyu’s lips curled, his slightly cold voice irresistibly seductive. “But I won’t force you. The choice is yours.”

Shen Huaishi was stunned for a long while. He slowly sat down.

Meanwhile, Lin Qingyu stood up. “When you’ve mulled it over, come find me.”

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After the Dragon Boat Festival passed, the days became hotter. It had not rained in the capital for two months; the fields cracked and the streams dried up. Because of the severe drought, the new crown prince Xiao Jie had gone to Tiantai Mountain with the imperial preceptor to pray for rain, and they hadn't returned yet.

The sun shone brightly and cicadas chirped as Lin Qingyu spent over half the day in the library of the Imperial Academy of Medicine, reading half of a book titled *Herbs in Great Yu*. Suddenly, someone touched his right shoulder, and he turned right instinctively. Nobody was there, but when he turned back, he saw a man in his thirties sitting on the table to his left.

"Why are you here?" Lin Qingyu asked, curious.

The hotter the weather grew, the lazier Gu Fuzhou became. Lin Qingyu hadn't seen Gu Fuzhou go out much at all since summer started. If the general had braved the scorching sun to find Lin Qingyu at the Imperial Academy of Medicine, it must have been important.

A thin layer of sweat glistened on Gu Fuzhou's forehead. Putting one hand behind his back, he closed the book in front of Lin Qingyu with the other. "I have something to give you," he said with a smile.

"What is it?"

Gu Fuzhou brought his hand out from behind his back; it held a porcelain jar. He said serenely, "Ever since that little gu scorpion died at Huantong's feet, you've been sad and inconsolable all the time. As your husband, I can't stand to see it. So…"

Lin Qingyu's heartbeat quickened. "Did you…"

"Yes. I'm giving you a nest of little gu creatures." Gu Fuzhou opened the jar. "I sent someone to the southern border to find the King of Gu, so these should meet your standards."

Lin Qingyu took a closer look. The insects that Gu Fuzhou was giving him did seem like the kind he wanted. He'd only know whether they had the *effect* he wanted after he began rearing them; still, this had already saved him a lot of time.

He smiled. “This is the best gift I’ve ever received.”

Gu Fuzhou felt a mixture of emotions. “Hmm…is it better than the engagement ring I gave you?”

In truth, a nest of small venomous insects was much more useful to Lin Qingyu than a ring. Since he had to prepare medicine often, wearing jewelry on his hands was inconvenient. So, although he’d kept the ring that Gu Fuzhou gave him, he’d put it away with other important items. Lin Qingyu thought it would be all right to tell a harmless little lie right now, however. He wiped the sweat from Gu Fuzhou’s forehead with his sleeve. “I still prefer the ring.”

Gu Fuzhou relaxed, leaning against the table. Even then, he was much taller than Lin Qingyu, who was standing at full height. He took Lin Qingyu’s hand casually, making the shorter man step forward to stand between his legs.

Studying Lin Qingyu’s expression, he said, “You lied again, Physician Lin. You obviously like the gu creatures better. Tsk—I almost got tricked again.”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes were mirthful. “What’s the difference? You’re the one who gave me both.”

Gu Fuzhou raised his eyebrows. “Then where’s my gift back?”

Lin Qingyu gently touched his cheek. “I’ll give it to you once we’re home.”

Gu Fuzhou seemed dissatisfied. He didn’t release Lin Qingyu. “Hm…? You might as well say you’ll give it to me a year from now.”

“This is the library,” Lin Qingyu reminded him. “Students from the Imperial Academy of Medicine might come over.”

“Ah. I see.” Gu Fuzhou laughed and let him go.

Before leaving, Lin Qingyu had to reshelve a bunch of medical books. Gu Fuzhou followed him, handing books over one at a time for Lin Qingyu to put away. When only one book remained, Gu Fuzhou suddenly called out, “Qingyu.”

As soon as Lin Qingyu turned around, Gu Fuzhou gently pushed him until his back was against the bookshelf. He didn’t have time to react before

Gu Fuzhou bent down and kissed his lips.

At that point, Lin Qingyu was so flustered that he froze. This wasn't the general's manor, let alone their bedroom. They were in the library, and two guards were at the door. Even if nobody else saw them, this was where Lin Qingyu normally studied. How could Gu Fuzhou kiss him *here*…?

It wasn't until his lip was bitten that Lin Qingyu came to his senses. "Qingyu, open your mouth," he heard Gu Fuzhou say.

Lin Qingyu held the last medical book in his arms, his cheeks flushing as he instinctively called out, "Jiang…"

As soon as Lin Qingyu's lips opened, Jiang-gongzi's little tongue came in, making some indecent noises.

Outside, the weather changed. A flash of lighting streaked through the air, bringing strong winds and a rainstorm with it. The rain washed the windows, and it was dark as night in the library.

Lin Qingyu leaned against the bookshelf with his eyes closed, letting Gu Fuzhou kiss him as his eyelashes trembled.

The kiss was gentle yet passionate.

This was the first bout of rain during the peak of that summer—and the last.

In the eighth month, the former crown prince Xiao Cheng died in Jinyang Palace. In the tenth month, the emperor died of illness. Crown Prince Xiao Jie ascended the throne, and his era was called Chuxi. He instated Empress Wen as Great Yu's sole empress dowager, and she ruled the country from behind the curtain.

Chapter 86

THE DAY XIAO JIE ASCENDED to the throne was an auspicious one, yet it was also an ordinary autumn day. Lin Qingyu was still only a male wife and a fifth-rank imperial physician, supposedly unqualified to participate in the coronation ceremony despite holding an official position. However, he could stand among the civil officials; the minister of revenue and the imperial advisor stood at his left and right respectively. At just twenty years of age, he was the youngest among the fifth-rank officials.

Some said Lin Qingyu could stand there thanks to General Gu; others felt he was favored by the new emperor and the empress dowager. Lin Qingyu could walk freely in the palace, and he often went to Qinzheng Hall and Fengyi Palace; thus, he wasn't merely an imperial physician. Rumors were circulating in the palace that the new emperor had once asked Lin Qingyu what position he wanted, even joking that Lin Qingyu could choose any position short of prime minister. Apparently, however, Lin Qingyu had refused and said that he wanted only to be an imperial physician.

At the cry of "The emperor has arrived!" the ministers—including Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou—knelt and kowtowed. Lin Qingyu was uncomfortable as he knelt; the ground was hard. A long red carpet was laid from the palace gate to Zichen Hall; the new emperor walked over it, passing the civil and military officials, and ascended the long steps leading to the palace.

The color black was esteemed in Great Yu, so the emperor's dragon robe was mostly black and gold—pure black with a border of golden thread, embroidered with a nine-clawed coiled dragon. The wide hem of the robe dragged over the long steps, covering the emperor's feet. Every time he took a pace, the gold beads dangling from his ceremonial headdress would knock against each other.

Following behind the emperor was a eunuch with a gentle and slightly androgynous appearance. He wore the robes of the head eunuch of the Directorate of Ceremonial. Staring closely at the emperor's back, he

trailed him step by step up the long flight of stairs into Zichen Hall and finally to the throne.

Xiao Jie sat on the dragon throne and said something. At that, a ceremonial officer cried, “Rise!”

Lin Qingyu stood up and stared at the dragon throne from a distance. Xiao Jie wore a luxurious dragon robe, but he was merely a beautiful fool beneath Lin Qingyu’s notice. Lin Qingyu only glanced at him once, then moved his gaze to Xi Rong instead.

It was amusing. No matter how much Xi Rong hated his status as a eunuch, he was restricted to that role for Xiao Jie’s sake, and for the sake of power. At least he was the head eunuch now.

After the coronation ceremony, Lin Qingyu would have returned to the manor with Gu Fuzhou, but Xiaosongzi found him and said that the emperor had summoned him to Qinzheng Hall.

“Tell me, did the emperor ask for me?” Lin Qingyu inquired. “Or did Eunuch Xi?”

Xiaosongzi was now the eunuch who served tea in Qinzheng Hall, so he oversaw everything that happened there. “The emperor,” he replied. “Eunuch Xi is busy with the empress dowager’s move from Fengyi Palace to Ci’an Palace.”

“It’s nothing important, then,” Gu Fuzhou said. “Go ahead. I’ll wait for you in the imperial garden.”

When Lin Qingyu got to Qinzheng Hall, several palace maids surrounded Xiao Jie, helping him change his clothes. When Xiao Jie saw Lin Qingyu, he smiled. “Imperial Physician Li, you’re here. Please sit down. I…I’ll be right there. Xiaosongzi, bring some tea over.”

It didn’t take the emperor long to change into more casual clothes. “The dragon robe is much too complicated to wear,” he complained. “And the crown was so heavy that it felt like my neck was going to break.”

“The robe is heavy to reflect the emperor’s eminence,” Lin Qingyu replied.

“But I don’t have enough of an aura,” replied Xiao Jie, quite self-conscious. “Even wearing the dragon robe, I don’t look very imposing. It’d

be much more suitable on Taizi-gege…on Third Brother."

Saying such things in front of an official made Xiao Jie seem like a walking idiot to Lin Qingyu. And however smart Xi Rong was, he was half a fool if you averaged his intelligence and Xiao Jie's.

"—Or Sixth Brother," Xiao Jie continued. "Imperial Physician Lin, have you seen my sixth brother?"

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Yes."

"Isn't he beautiful?" Xiao Jie asked happily.

"Yes."

"I've always thought my sixth brother is the handsomest young man in the world. If I'd been in my father's shoes, I wouldn't have left him in Jinyang Palace, nor separated him and his mother for so many years." Xiao Jie seemed regretful. "It'd be good to keep him in the palace—if only as a pretty face to look at."

"The empress dowager has brought him back to the palace, so you'll be able to see him more often in future," Lin Qingyu replied.

Since Xiao Jie had ascended the throne, Xiao Li was no longer the sixth prince. After gaining the empress dowager's approval, Xiao Jie had bestowed the rank of commandery prince upon Xiao Li, along with the title Huai.

Hearing this, Xiao Jie cheered up again. "I love looking at my sixth brother and you—and, well, A-Rong too."

Lin Qingyu wasn't that interested in speaking to a fool. "Your Majesty, have you called me over for something?"

"Oh. Yes." Xiao Jie turned his head from side to side. "I wore the crown for an entire day, and my neck is beyond sore. I hear you're good at acupuncture. Can your needles help me out?"

"Forgive my rudeness," Lin Qingyu said before he touched Xiao Jie's neck. "Does it hurt here?"

"Right there!" Xiao Jie hissed through his teeth, his eyebrows furrowing tightly.

“Acupuncture isn’t necessary for an ordinary strain. A hot compress is enough,” Lin Qingyu assured him.

Recalling that Gu Fuzhou was still waiting for him, Lin Qingyu didn’t stay in Qinzheng Hall for long. Walking out, he happened to run into Xi Rong just getting back from Ci’an Palace.

Xi Rong was polite as usual. “Greetings, Imperial Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu responded curtly and walked in the direction of the imperial garden. Xi Rong stared at his back with sharp eyes. As soon as he entered Qinzheng Hall, he asked Xiao Jie, “Did you need Imperial Physician Lin for something, Your Majesty?”

Xiao Jie tilted his head, waiting for Xiaosongzi to put a hot compress on his neck. “Oh—my neck was sore, so I wanted him to look at it.”

Nearing the emperor, Xi Rong took the handkerchief from Xiaosongzi. “Leave this to me. You can all leave.”

When the maids and other eunuchs were gone, Xi Rong applied the cloth to Xiao Jie’s neck. “Next time you’re ill, don’t call Imperial Physician Lin. He’s not the only member of the Department of Imperial Physicians with excellent medical skills.”

Xiao Jie didn’t understand. “Why not?”

“Imperial Physician Lin and General Gu are not loyal to you, the emperor,” Xi Rong replied calmly.

Xiao Jie, unbelieving, widened his eyes. “There’s no way that’s true!”

“No?” Xi Rong’s lips curled up. “If they could support you until you ascended the throne, they could also make you another Xiao Cheng. Why else would Lin Qingyu want the empress dowager to rule Great Yu behind the scenes? Why would he want Gu Fuzhou to control the imperial palace guards?”

Xiao Jie was confused. “But they helped us so much. It should be all right to give them something in return.”

Xi Rong understood Xiao Jie well, so he knew it would be pointless to say any more. “In any case, Your Majesty, remember what I said—stay away from Lin Qingyu.”

“But…” Xiao Jie said reluctantly.

Xi Rong’s grip became more forceful, almost strangling Xiao Jie. He leaned in close. “Your Majesty, how long have you and Lin Qingyu known each other?” he asked in a deep voice. “And how long have *we* known each other? Are you going to trust him and not me?”

Even as someone held his neck, Xiao Jie was completely unaware of any danger; he only noticed that Xi Rong seemed upset, and said hurriedly, “All right, all right. I promise to stay away from him in the future. Don’t be angry.”

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As he waited, Gu Fuzhou strolled through the imperial garden. Empress Wen liked chrysanthemums, and the new emperor had planted all kinds of them to show his filial piety. They were in full bloom, and there was a certain elegance to walking among them.

After walking a bit, Gu Fuzhou found a stone bench to sit on. Just when he began to feel bored, he saw a young man in beautiful clothing squatting behind a rock garden. Though Gu Fuzhou couldn’t see his face, he guessed who it was—Xiao Li was virtually the only man who could wear such opulent clothing in the palace.

“Is that the prince of Huai?” Gu Fuzhou asked the eunuch walking behind him.

“Yes.”

“What’s he doing?” Gu Fuzhou asked, amused. “Playing with mud?”

“I don’t know,” the eunuch replied, embarrassed.

Gu Fuzhou stared at Xiao Li’s back and frowned slightly. He was about to see what Xiao Li was doing when he heard Lin Qingyu’s voice behind him. “General.”

In the presence of his beautiful wife, Gu Fuzhou lost interest in looking at anyone else. “Ah—my wife is finally here.”

Lin Qingyu noticed that it looked as though Gu Fuzhou had been waiting for a while. “I thought you liked waiting for me?” he responded.

“Yes,” Gu Fuzhou said, smiling. “But I like being with you better.”

They returned to the manor, where Huantong was repeatedly entering and leaving the courtyard. When Lin Qingyu asked what he was doing, he learned that Huantong was distributing charcoal to every room.

“Is it already the season to use charcoal in?” Lin Qingyu asked softly. “Time passes so quickly.”

In the blink of an eye, winter had nearly arrived.

“I don’t think it’s very cold,” Huantong replied. “But I was afraid you’d be chilly, Young Master, so I thought I’d replenish the charcoal early.”

The weather did get cold at night, and it was actually much colder than during the days. Before going to bed, Lin Qingyu added a few pieces of charcoal to the brazier. He was about to start a fire when Gu Fuzhou stopped him.

“You’re using charcoal already? It’s not winter yet—what will you do in winter? Go out with a quilt draped over your shoulders? I’m sure you understand the logic of the saying ‘keep warm in spring and get cold in autumn,’ right, Physician Lin?”

Lin Qingyu looked at him. “But I’m cold.”

“It won’t be cold if we sleep together,” Gu Fuzhou said breezily. “I’ll have the servants swap the bunk beds for a big bed tomorrow.”

Lin Qingyu lowered his gaze. “All right.”

Seriously, Gu Fuzhou added, “It’ll be a tight fit, but let’s sleep together tonight.”

Gu Fuzhou ran hot, so it stayed warm under the quilt as long as they slept together—even in the cold winter. Lin Qingyu slept on the inside of the bed, facing the wall. Gu Fuzhou hugged him from behind, his chest against Lin Qingyu’s back. The pillow and quilt smelled faintly medicinal, since Lin Qingyu had always slept on the bottom bunk.

Before long, Gu Fuzhou said, “Don’t turn your back to me, Qingyu, or I’ll accidentally lie on your hair.”

Lin Qingyu flipped over to face Gu Fuzhou. “Are you happy now? Time to sleep.”

“Let’s sleep a little later,” Gu Fuzhou said.

Lin Qingyu grabbed the quilt instinctively. “Why?”

Not saying anything, Gu Fuzhou kissed him.

The lower bunk was too small, so they were squished together. Any change in either man’s body was immediately apparent. Thus, Gu Fuzhou encountered a surprise. As if he’d discovered something spectacular, he declared, “Qingyu, you’re aroused.”

Lin Qingyu’s face reddened. “Why can’t I be? I’m not Xi Rong,” he retorted calmly. He was a normal man. If he was intimate with someone he liked, that would obviously arouse him.

Gu Fuzhou laughed. “That’s not what I meant. Didn’t you say before that you had no interest in such things? Because you’d seen too much?” On top of that, Lin Qingyu’s temperament was so cold that it seemed as though he’d never be dominated by such worldly desires. Such a beauty reacting to his kiss was the peak moment of Gu Fuzhou’s life.

At some point, they had changed positions, Gu Fuzhou hovering over Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu tried to remain calm. “Do you want me *not* to be aroused?”

“How could I?” Gu Fuzhou held both his wrists down on the bed, gazing down from above him. “I’m honored you’re affected by me.”

When Gu Fuzhou said that, Lin Qingyu felt even more uncomfortable. “Don’t worry about it. It’ll go away.”

“Why wait until it does?” Gu Fuzhou smiled. “I’ll help you.”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes widened a little.

“It’s no problem. I’m happy to. And if you feel embarrassed, you can help me as well.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t say anything, neither agreeing nor declining.

Gu Fuzhou knew that he was willing—Lin Qingyu wouldn't be coy about such a matter. But he hoped that Lin Qingyu could say it aloud. He even hoped—like the incorrigibly lazy person he was—that Lin Qingyu would take the initiative.

"You don't want to?" Gu Fuzhou asked, sounding disappointed.

Lin Qingyu was speechless.

Gu Fuzhou made a show of his sadness. "I don't even like doing it to myself. It makes my hand sore. Regardless, I'm offering to help you now. Yet you look so unappreciative!"

Lin Qingyu still remained silent.

"Okay, then. We'll just keep kissing and hugging instead," Gu Fuzhou sighed, "It's because you aren't interested, Physician Lin. But since I like you, I'll like everything about you—including your indifference."

Lin Qingyu couldn't stand it any longer. "That's enough. If you keep going, I'll wilt."

Gu Fuzhou seized the opportunity. "Qingyu…?"

Lin Qingyu turned his head away, his eyelashes trembling. "…Do whatever you want."

Chapter 87

LIN QINGYU REFUSED to open his eyes; in the darkness, the sensation of touch intensified. Then he felt something dripping on his face, and he opened his eyes a sliver to meet Gu Fuzhou's gaze.

Gu Fuzhou had been looking at him the entire time, and his eyes were now free of teenage inexperience. All that remained was the surging current of a grown man's desire. In that state, Gu Fuzhou stared at him, watching Lin Qingyu's flushed face, his slightly parted lips, and the expression that normally never appeared on his face. What had dripped on Lin Qingyu was Gu Fuzhou's sweat—it was freezing outside, but Gu Fuzhou was sweating all over.

Lin Qingyu couldn't help but ask, "Are you tired?"

"No," Gu Fuzhou laughed. "Why do you think that?"

"If you aren't tired, why are you sweating so much?"

Gu Fuzhou's hand stopped moving. "Well…maybe because I'm holding myself back?" he said uncertainly.

Lin Qingyu paused, hesitant to speak.

"Do you want to help me?" Gu Fuzhou asked, smiling.

Not knowing where to put his hands, Lin Qingyu lifted them, then set them down again. "Forget it. I…don't really know how to." He couldn't even do it to himself, let alone help someone else.

"Hmm? There are things even you don't know how to do, Physician Lin?" Gu Fuzhou smiled. "That's not an issue. I can teach you—it's easy…"

Grabbing his hand, Gu Fuzhou really did teach him.

Lin Qingyu closed his eyes again. Gu Fuzhou's breath lingered in his ears; the general occasionally called him "Qingyu," "darling," and even "laopo." Getting called "laopo" almost wilted Lin Qingyu's arousal, but he suspected the word meant something different from "old woman" in Gu

Fuzhou's hometown. Otherwise, that pet name he'd made a habit of using would be difficult to accept.

At that point, fortunately, Gu Fuzhou kissed him. As their lips and tongues intertwined, Lin Qingyu could put being addressed as "laopo" in the back of his mind. Gu Fuzhou began to compliment him, praising his long eyelashes, his beautiful body, his soothing voice—and tried to get Lin Qingyu to call him "laogong," causing Lin Qingyu to nearly deflate again.

Lin Qingyu knew that Gu Fuzhou was talkative, but he hadn't thought that he'd have so much to say in bed. Gu Fuzhou spoke in a low voice, his every word an aphrodisiac that caused strange, unfamiliar reactions in Lin Qingyu's body—everything except for "laopo" and "laogong," of course, which would be classified as poisons.

Finally getting what he wanted, Gu Fuzhou successfully sullied his beautiful wife. Afterward, he got out of bed and asked the servants to bring them a basin of hot water.

The servants attending to their room that night were Hualu and a woman surnamed Yun. After Auntie Yun delivered hot water and towels, she smiled and said, "The day has finally come. I thought the general and his wife would live in celibacy for the rest of their lives."

"What are you talking about, Auntie?" Hualu asked, curious.

Auntie Yun smiled. "The couple wanted hot water and towels in the middle of the night. What else could the reason be but *that*?"

Realizing what she was talking about, Hualu immediately blushed. She'd followed Lin Qingyu for ages, but she'd never thought about anything like that. She'd expected that even if the young master married the general, they would still be polite and respectful to each other. She'd never imagined that the young master, who seemed as pure as an immortal, would eventually be dragged into worldly desire by the general.

"Those on night duty will have to make a couple more trips in the future," Auntie Yun said happily.

Gu Fuzhou tidied the space and changed into clean robes, then helped Lin Qingyu do the same. They slept in each other's arms; after such unrestrained physical contact, their relationship had also lost the inexperience and innocence unique to youth.

A big bed was placed in the general's room, and the "historical" bunk bed was moved back into the study. When the general one day upset his wife and got kicked out of the bedroom, he could at least make do in the study, lying on the bunk bed and reminiscing about the glorious years when they'd been sworn brothers.

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Winter came earlier that year—the first snow in the capital fell as soon as the end of the tenth month. Wearing the winter robes of a Great Yu official, Lin Qingyu walked along a palace road swept of snow. A eunuch followed closely behind him, holding an umbrella steadily over his head.

Arriving at Qinzheng Hall, Lin Qingyu hadn't expected to see his husband. Surprised, he asked, "When did you enter the palace?"

"An hour ago. The palace sent someone to summon me," Gu Fuzhou said, eyeing the plaque hanging at the entrance. "It seems that something serious has happened."

After Xiao Jie took the throne, Gu Fuzhou had activated half-retired mode. He rarely entered the palace except for major events like the coronation ceremony. Lin Qingyu worried that his husband would lose respect in court over his absence, but reality proved those concerns unnecessary. Gu Fuzhou had a knack for assessing the situation at court, winning people over despite staying home all the time, and grasping military power firmly without tiring himself.

When they'd helped Xiao Jie ascend the throne, one of their conditions was that Great General Gu mustn't be bothered often. Thus, Xi Rong wouldn't call Gu Fuzhou over for any small matter; something serious must have occurred for Gu Fuzhou to be summoned to the palace.

Together, they entered the hall. In addition to Xiao Jie and Xi Rong, Empress Dowager Wen was present, so Xi Rong restrained himself and behaved like a normal head eunuch.

Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou bowed to Xiao Jie and the empress dowager. Xiao Jie's face was pale, and the empress dowager was frowning.

“You’re both here,” she said. “Please have a seat.”

“What happened?” asked Lin Qingyu.

The empress dowager closed her eyes. “Xi Rong, bring it here for the general and Imperial Physician Lin to see.”

Xi Rong handed Lin Qingyu a palm-sized brocade box. Xiao Jie shrank back in the dragon throne as he watched Lin Qingyu begin to open it.

“Be prepared, Imperial Physician Lin. Don’t be frightened by what’s inside.”

Xi Rong’s eyes dimmed ever so slightly. “Don’t worry, Your Majesty. Imperial Physician Lin is a knowledgeable man; he isn’t afraid of anything.”

Although he’d guessed that there would be nothing good in the box, Lin Qingyu still froze when he saw what looked like a dried strip of meat.

Gu Fuzhou, standing behind him, smelled blood in the cold air. He frowned and asked, “What’s that?”

Lin Qingyu closed the box quickly. “A tongue—a human tongue,” he said coldly.

Gu Fuzhou paused. “Whose?”

“Zhao Mingwei’s. Great General Zhao’s,” Xiao Jie said, trembling.

Lin Qingyu sensed Gu Fuzhou’s breathing suddenly deepen; his own chest felt tight.

Zhao Mingwei, a famous general of Great Yu, had once been a deputy general under Gu Fuzhou. Though he hadn’t achieved victories to match Gu Fuzhou’s, he was still extremely skilled at leading troops. After Gu Fuzhou returned to the capital, Zhao Mingwei had led the northwest army defending Yongliang. In the past year of his leadership, the northwest army had been evenly matched with Western Xia’s, both sides losing some battles and winning others.

A short while ago, Zhao Mingwei had suddenly sent a declaration that he expected that he could annihilate Western Xia’s army in one battle. Gu Fuzhou, however, didn’t think that attempting such a thing would be the

right move. Although he hadn't fought the Western Xia military advisor himself, he could tell from the northwest army's reports that the enemy advisor was unpredictable and had tricks up his sleeve. In a memorial to the throne, he'd suggested that Zhao Mingwei make more concrete plans before taking action. Military orders to that effect had been delivered to the northwest, but he didn't know whether Zhao Mingwei had obeyed them.

"What happened?" Lin Qingyu asked. "Has General Zhao…died for the country?"

Xi Rong looked at Gu Fuzhou. "Western Xia soundly defeated Zhao Mingwei's two-hundred-thousand-strong army, and the city of Yongliang—which General Gu defended for over a decade—was lost. Great General Zhao committed suicide after his capture, dying for Great Yu. Western Xia cut out his tongue and sent it to the capital, along with notification of our defeat."

Yongliang was an important northwestern city—the border's strongest line of defense. The seizure of Yongliang was akin to casting a door wide open in Great Yu's northwest.

"They went too far! Their actions were totally inhumane!" Xiao Jie cried hoarsely. "The people of Yongliang had no time to escape, and now their lives are in Western Xia's hands. General Gu, what are we to do should Western Xia wish to massacre the citizens and cut out *everyone's* tongues…?"

"This year's winter is colder than that of two years ago, and heavy snow has fallen in the northwest for days now, obstructing several roads for delivering food and grain. Even the fastest horses would still take half a month to travel from Yongliang to the capital," the empress dowager said, her fists clenching so tightly that her fingernail guards[23] embedded themselves tightly in her palms. "That means Zhao Mingwei died half a month ago. We don't know Yongliang's current status."

Lin Qingyu stayed silent for a long time before saying, "Western Xia has plagued Great Yu's border for years for nothing more than money, food, cattle, and sheep. Since they'd already occupied Yongliang and captured General Zhao alive, why didn't they try to negotiate with Great Yu? Why did they cut out General Zhao's tongue as provocation instead?"

Gu Fuzhou laughed, but there was no smile on his face. “Perhaps their military advisor doesn’t want money, food, or livestock.”

“Then what does he want?” Xiao Jie asked.

“Some people delight in battle and enjoy strategizing. Only on the battlefield do they feel their lives are meaningful,” Gu Fuzhou said coldly. “He hopes that war between Great Yu and Western Xia never ends.”

This shocked Xiao Jie. “S-someone like that exists?”

A moment later, the empress dowager said, “While the late emperor was still alive, he asked the imperial preceptor to divine the nation’s fate. The preceptor predicted, ‘Battle for the throne, political marriage with the North Kingdom, and the Ghost Commander of Western Xia.’ During the struggle for the throne, the princes targeted one another, and most died at each other’s hands. A number of civil and military officials also lost their positions or even their heads in the political infighting. And the root cause of former crown prince’s removal from his position was that marriage in the north. So the first two things the imperial preceptor divined have come true, and both related to Great Yu’s fate. Could that last part, ‘Ghost Commander of Western Xia,’ refer to this mysterious military advisor?”

“Your Majesties, let’s not worry about whether Western Xia’s military advisor is the commander the imperial preceptor mentioned,” Xi Rong advised. “Now that we’ve lost Yongliang, the northwest is leaderless. Heavy snow has blocked the roads, so there’s no way to deliver rations and provisions quickly—a gift from the heavens to Western Xia. If we let Western Xia do what they want, I’m afraid they’ll become unstoppable; they might even attack the capital one day. The most urgent task at hand is to send a general northwest immediately to control the situation.”

The empress dowager disliked it when eunuchs participated in politics, but in such urgent circumstances, she had to agree with Xi Rong’s analysis. “General Gu,” she said, her tone a bit calmer, “you’re the only one at court who can save the northwest.”

Before Gu Fuzhou could answer, Lin Qingyu interjected, “Not necessarily. And the general’s old injury has been acting up again, so he shouldn’t go into battle.”

“The general himself should know best whether his old injury is acting up again,” Xi Rong replied meaningfully.

Gu Fuzhou said calmly, “It is indeed.”

Xi Rong’s eyes narrowed.

The empress dowager sighed. “Bring the cabinet ministers to Qinzheng Hall for discussion.”

On the way back to the general’s manor, Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou were both silent. Only when they got back into their room did Lin Qingyu say, “About General Zhao’s death… I feel saddened as well. Still, you can’t go.”

“There hasn’t been a general leading that army successfully for a while,” Gu Fuzhou said slowly. “If I don’t go to war, then Yongliang…”

“Yongliang has nothing to do with me,” Lin Qingyu said coldly. “I just want you to be safe.”

Gu Fuzhou shook his head. “You don’t see the bigger picture.”

“What do you mean?”

“The military advisor of Western Xia is the same person as their general. He’s both an advisor and a commander. There’s not a lot of description of him in the original novel, but he’s an author-confirmed genius on the battlefield. If you let him burn Yongliang today, he may attack the capital tomorrow. At that point, I definitely wouldn’t survive. And considering your beauty, you’d most likely end up—fuck, I’m pissed off just thinking about it.”

Lin Qingyu frowned. “So you want to go?”

Gu Fuzhou paused. “No. I just think there’s really nobody else who can do it.”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes turned cold.

“Darling, don’t be angry,” Gu Fuzhou said helplessly. “Come hug me.” He spread his arms, wanting to embrace Lin Qingyu.

But Lin Qingyu’s expression darkened. He avoided his husband’s embrace. “No.”

Gu Fuzhou wasn’t upset at the rejection. With an exaggerated sigh, he complained, “You even took a half step back. Seriously? Such a small movement, yet you inflicted such serious damage.”

Lin Qingyu gritted his teeth. “How are you still in the mood to joke around? You said yourself that you rely on luck to fight, and you think you can beat an author-confirmed genius?”

“No,” Gu Fuzhou said honestly. “But in school, I thought I did badly every time I took an exam. I was always ranked first in my class, though.”

Lin Qingyu had nothing to say to that.

Chapter 88

FOR THE PAST COUPLE OF DAYS, all the civil and military officials at morning court had been discussing the loss of Yongliang. Wu Zhan again recommended himself as general, and even the nearly eighty-year-old Duke Wu stood up to volunteer. They were full of fighting spirit, ready to break through all obstacles and fight until the end.

Xiao Jie was moved by their motivation, but he didn't dare decide for himself. Turning around, he asked the empress dowager behind the pearl curtain, "Mother, what do you…?"

The ministers hadn't expected someone else besides the empress dowager behind the pearl curtain, wearing the robes of a fifth-rank official. It was none other than Lin Qingyu, who was favored by the emperor.

Empress Dowager Wen shook her head. "General Wu is better at naval warfare; he's also never fought in the northwest. Duke Wu is elderly and has been retired for many years in the capital. He is willing but unable to fight."

Duke Wu wasn't satisfied with that. "Lian Po, the famed general of the Zhao nation, was still able to fight at over eighty years old. I'm not that old yet, so I can still do battle!"

Xiao Jie fidgeted on the dragon throne. "Is there nobody else… ah, other than Great General Gu?"

"Who else would there be? In recent years, most of Great Yu's generals have died or been permanently injured, and many were also implicated in the struggle for the throne. Now we're short on talented generals, and only a few of us can rise to the occasion." Wu Zhan forced a smile. "Though I've never been to the northwest, Your Majesties, fighting is about the same anywhere. Since General Gu is unwilling to go, allow me to try."

It wasn't hard to tell that when he mentioned General Gu, Wu Zhan's tone was less respectful than before. Last year, when the late emperor wanted Gu Fuzhou to return to the northwest to replace Zhao Mingwei, Gu

Fuzhou had declined, saying that the poison hadn't been cleared out of his body yet. At the time, Wu Zhan and Duke Wu had agreed with him.

But now things were different. The situation in the northwest was of utmost urgency, and Zhao Mingwei had been humiliated in death; Western Xia had even cut his tongue out as provocation. The northwest army's morale was on thin ice, and the lives of Yongliang's tens of thousands of citizens were in Western Xia's hands. At such a time, anyone who was still alive and had the spirit of a military commander would rush to the battlefield. But Gu Fuzhou used the same excuse as last year: He claimed he was unwell, refused visitors, and even declined to go to morning court.

Great General Gu had…disappointed them.

The empress dowager hesitated, then looked at Lin Qingyu. "What do you think, Imperial Physician Lin?"

Lin Qingyu was about to speak when Xiaosongzi rushed in the side door. "Empress Dowager, Imperial Physician Lin, an urgent report has come from the northwest."

The empress dowager opened the report and quickly scanned it. Her face darkened. "Western Xia's capital has issued a declaration of war, vowing to avenge the Western Xia prince who died in Yongliang ten years ago. Their declaration asks that we send Gu Fuzhou to the front line so they can take his head openly. Otherwise, they will massacre everyone in Yongliang in a month."

A decade earlier, Western Xia's onetime crown prince had died under General Gu's Qingyun Jiuzhou spear.

Lin Qingyu took the memorial, which felt like it weighed more than a thousand pounds. He said nothing, but his expression was frighteningly grim.

"Imperial Physician Lin…" the empress dowager said. She hesitated for a moment, then continued, "Qingyu?"

Lin Qingyu made a sound in response, then came back to his senses, realizing that he was still in court.

"Other than General Gu, there are no other talented military officials in court qualified to take charge in the northwest," the empress dowager

declared. “And if he doesn’t go… Should we abandon the tens of thousands of citizens in Yongliang?” She sighed. “When a nest is overturned, no eggs remain intact. Should Western Xia massacre Yongliang today, they will come for the capital tomorrow.”

Lin Qingyu chuckled coldly. “No need to preach such a truism to me, Your Majesty. Everyone understands that.”

The empress dowager hesitated and asked, “Shall we inform the officials, then?”

Realizing that he could no longer think through things calmly, Lin Qingyu just replied on instinct: “Don’t publicize this for now.”

After court was dismissed, Xiaosongzi found Lin Qingyu and told him, “Imperial Physician Lin, I met General Gu on my way to deliver the urgent report. He’d already read it.”

Lin Qingyu’s chest tightened. “Where is he now?”

“The general said that he’d wait for you in the imperial garden.”

When Lin Qingyu found Gu Fuzhou, the general was sitting by the pond in the imperial garden, absently feeding the fish. The pond contained dozens of colorful koi, adding some vibrancy to the monotonous winter.

Gu Fuzhou sprinkled fish food in the pond, and the school of koi swam over in a rush, vying for the food. Seeing Lin Qingyu’s reflection in the water, he said, “Look at the fish here. They were born in the palace, and they have so much to eat that they’re plump. Why do they still compete with their companions?”

“Because greed is endless,” Lin Qingyu said.

“That makes sense,” Gu Fuzhou agreed.

“Why didn’t you attend the court meeting, since you were here anyway?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Gu Fuzhou threw the rest of the fish food into the pond. “There’s nowhere for me to sit in Zichen Hall, and it’s too tiring to stand.”

“If others hear you say that, they’ll think you have rebellious intentions.” Other than the emperor, the only person who could sit in Zichen Hall was the empress dowager, who sat behind a curtain.

Gu Fuzhou laughed. “That’s unfair. I have no interest in being emperor—it’s so hard.”

His words were funny, so Lin Qingyu wanted to smile as usual, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. “Did you read the urgent report from the northwest?”

Gu Fuzhou nodded. “What should we do, Qingyu? This time, I think I *have* to go.”

The words “not necessarily” got stuck in Lin Qingyu’s throat; he couldn’t speak them.

“Over the past few days, a number of officials have criticized me, regardless of their rank. Wu Zhan even found me yesterday and was so overcome by emotion that he jabbed a finger at me and called me a coward. It was hilarious,” Gu Fuzhou said. He laughed out loud, as if the incident had been ridiculous. “I deserved it; still, someone must’ve exaggerated things to make Wu Zhan so angry.”

That had occurred to Lin Qingyu as well. “You’re right.”

“Whoever it was achieved their goal. If I don’t go to the northwest, I’ll lose the support of the court, and how will the hot-blooded troops serve me wholeheartedly? A general unwilling to go into battle won’t even be able to protect his wife, since he’ll have no respect in the army.” Gu Fuzhou pressed the spot between his brows. “And now Western Xia is threatening us using the lives of Yongliang’s citizens—so annoying.”

Lin Qingyu had listened to Gu Fuzhou in silence. “Then you want to go.”

“It’s not that I want to go, but I must,” Gu Fuzhou replied.

“You certainly do care about the people,” Lin Qingyu noted impassively.

“You’re one of them too,” Gu Fuzhou said without hesitation. “By protecting them, I’m also protecting you.”

Lin Qingyu slowly lowered his gaze. “I don’t need your protection, and I don’t want to be a saint who cares about the common people,” he said quietly. “I just want to be with you.”

“Countless souls in Western Xia have died under Great General Gu’s spear. They’re obviously targeting me this time,” Gu Fuzhou explained patiently. “I can avoid going to war for a while, but until Western Xia is defeated, I’ll never be free.”

“Now *you’re* trying to preach to me too,” Lin Qingyu said mockingly.

“I’m not—”

Lin Qingyu interrupted him coldly. “Have you ever thought about what I would do if something happened to you?”

Gu Fuzhou paused.

His wife’s voice trembled slightly. “Two years ago, on a snowy night, I knelt in front of your wheelchair and watched you slowly die, felt you grow colder in my hands. At the time, I didn’t know my own feelings and could still endure the pain of losing my husband. But if I have to go through that again now…”

Gu Fuzhou swallowed hard. “Qingyu…” he said hoarsely.

“Losing something isn’t scary. What’s scary is gaining something and losing it again,” Lin Qingyu murmured, looking at his hands. “That’s too cruel—even for me.”

“I’m sorry, Qingyu,” Gu Fuzhou whispered. “But this time, I will do my level best to come back. Look—I wrote you a pledge.”

“You tried to live longer back then too, didn’t you? But what happened?” Lin Qingyu demanded woodenly. “You even apologized to me before you died, saying that you tried your best, but you couldn’t outlive Xiao Cheng. Have you forgotten all that?”

“No, I haven’t. But I was so ill then that however hard I tried, it would’ve been useless. It’s different now. I have a healthy body, and my hard work should be able to make miracles happen.” Gu Fuzhou smiled. “By the way, Qingyu, it’s unlucky for you to think about all this before I even leave for the battlefield.”

“Are you not worried at all?” Lin Qingyu couldn’t help but ask.

After a moment’s thought, Gu Fuzhou replied, “I’m a little scared, actually.”

Lin Qingyu glared at him.

“I’m afraid that I won’t do well—and that if I make a mistake, those who trusted me will lose their lives. I don’t like being tired or in pain. I’m a sore loser too. And I’m even more scared of…” Gu Fuzhou’s voice stopped abruptly; he swallowed his words. Slowly, he continued, “So someone like me could never be a protagonist.”

Lin Qingyu knew that Gu Fuzhou was trying to lighten the mood as usual, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Why do you say that?”

“Because in books, male protagonists are either extremely powerful and easily crush their opponents, or they’re purehearted and still do what they know is impossible. But I…” Gu Fuzhou spread his hands. “I don’t have extraordinary abilities, and I’m lazy and timid. No wonder I can only be a supporting character, even after transmigrating into a book.”

“Wrong,” Lin Qingyu said. “Lu Wancheng and Gu Fuzhou may have been supporting characters, but after you came into this world, they became the protagonists.”

Gu Fuzhou’s eyes held a smile. “You’re so good with your words, Physician Lin. But you overlooked something. It’s only because I came to *your* side. It’s thanks to *you* that Lu Wancheng and Gu Fuzhou could become the protagonists of the book. Do you remember what a protagonist is, Qingyu?”

Lin Qingyu recited exactly what Gu Fuzhou had told him. “The ‘protagonist’ is the person who—however many blades get swung at them, however much blood is on their hands—always shines the brightest, even if they just crawled out of the mud.”

Snapping his fingers, Gu Fuzhou said leisurely, “That’s right. Xiao Cheng is dead, so we’ve replaced him as protagonist. His plot armor is ours now, so we won’t die that easily.”

Lin Qingyu disagreed with that claim. He was silent for a moment, then looked at Gu Fuzhou and said, “Xu Junyuan.”

“Qingyu, are you so angry that you’re seeing red?” asked Gu Fuzhou. “*I’m* your husband, not Xu Junyuan.”

Lin Qingyu was desperate—a rare sight. “Before, Xu Junyuan used your bazi to determine that you weren’t destined to die. We can ask him to divine your fate again to see whether you can achieve a resounding victory and safely return to the capital.”

“Huh,” Gu Fuzhou said, thinking that it would be rather useless to do that. In order not to spoil Lin Qingyu’s mood, though, he said, “That makes sense.”

“We’ve no time to lose,” Lin Qingyu said immediately. “I’ll have someone prepare a carriage.”

Gu Fuzhou smiled. “You and I are both powerful officials. We don’t need to go to Changsheng Temple for him now. Servants—summon Xu Junyuan to the palace. The emperor wants to see him.”

Chapter 89

TWO HOURS LATER, Xu Junyuan entered the palace. A eunuch led him to the imperial garden, and instead of the emperor, he saw a handsome couple in the pavilion.

Xu Junyuan wasn't surprised at all. He smiled and genially said, "Since ancient times, beauties have been paired with heroes. Seeing you two from afar, I thought I'd stepped into a painting depicting such beauties. It would've been even better if Imperial Physician Lin were wearing white robes to complement the winter scene." He nodded to them in greeting. "General Gu. Physician Lin."

Lin Qingyu got right to the point. "I invited you to the palace because I wish you to tell the general's fortune."

Xu Junyuan raised his eyebrows. "*You* invited me? The eunuch who came to Changsheng Temple told me that the emperor wanted to see me. Was there a misunderstanding?"

"What's the difference?" asked Gu Fuzhou. "The emperor is busy every day, so he can't do everything himself. My wife and I are following orders. Are you dissatisfied, imperial preceptor?"

"I dare not be," Xu Junyuan said meaningfully. "May I ask what you want me to divine for the general, Imperial Physician Lin?"

Lin Qingyu said, "I'd like you to divine for him what you once divined for my late husband, Young Marquess Lu."

Xu Junyuan looked hesitant. "That…may not be possible."

Lin Qingyu's eyes turned icy. "Why not?"

"Each time I divine someone's fate, I center the divination around one matter, and I never divine on the same matter twice. I used Jiang-gongzi's name and bazi to determine that he wasn't destined to die two years ago. That was one complete divination."

Xu Junyuan's expression didn't change when he said the name "Jiang-gongzi"—as if all three of them had known about Jiang for ages.

“Now, if General Gu seeks answers to the same question, will he use his own bazi, or Jiang-gongzi’s? Using the former, General Gu died in battle two years ago. But using the latter would be like reaching beneath the surface of a pond for the moon—a futile endeavor.”

Lin Qingyu sneered. “You *do* know everything, Imperial Preceptor.”

“You overstate my capabilities, Imperial Physician Lin,” Xu Junyuan said, smiling. “I only know a little more than others.”

“Since you’re so powerful, why can’t you divine the same matter twice?”

“The way of the heavens cannot be seen; an occasional glance is already a blessing,” Xu Junyuan explained. “If you try to prod deeply into it on more than one occasion, you may suffer consequences.”

“Ridiculous,” Lin Qingyu said coldly. “What if I forced you to divine his fate again today?”

Xu Junyuan seemed helpless. “I already told you. Even if I force a result, it won’t necessarily reflect the will of the heavens.”

“Qingyu.” Gu Fuzhou pulled Lin Qingyu back. “It’s no use.”

On the anniversary of Lu Wancheng’s death last year, Lin Qingyu had awoken in the middle of the night and lost control of his emotions. It took a great deal of effort to comfort him—in order to do so, Gu Fuzhou had even written a pledge. What Lin Qingyu didn’t know was that, the next day, the general had gone to Changsheng Temple and tried to force Xu Junyuan to divine his fate again, practically putting a knife to his neck. However, he’d received the same excuse.

Lin Qingyu shot him an ice-cold glance. “You knew this already?”

Gu Fuzhou equivocated, saying, “If he could really know when someone’s life would end, he might as well change his name to Book of Life and Death. But he’s only a mortal, in the end—what he can divine is limited.”

Xu Junyuan smiled. “You truly are someone who’s experienced life and death, General—you see things clearly. Life and death are predestined, and wealth and honor depend on the heavens. Please do not force this, Imperial Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu glared daggers at the imperial preceptor. “If I wished to force it, what would you do?”

“Rather than forcing things, Imperial Physician Lin, it’s better to believe Jiang-gongzi,” Xu Junyuan told him. “He was chosen by the heavens and came from afar, so he must be extraordinary in some sense. Though I cannot divine Gu Fuzhou’s fate, I am willing to believe that Jiang-gongzi is blessed by the heavens and will always survive in moments of crisis.”

“You haven’t changed, Imperial Preceptor,” Gu Fuzhou scoffed. “When I listen to your words, I feel as if I’ve studied for ten years and learned nothing.”

Xu Junyuan laughed freely. “You flatter me. Thank you.”

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Gu Fuzhou hadn’t yet announced whether he’d venture to the northwest. Numerous memorials written by generals volunteering to go to war were passed to Lin Qingyu; most were penned by military generals below the fourth rank, each with his own strengths and weaknesses. They could have served leading a vanguard, but not as the conflict’s highest-ranking general. The author of one memorial caught Gu Fuzhou’s eye—Duke Wu’s grandson, Wu Youyuan, a seventeen-year-old general training with the imperial guards.

“Wu Youyuan? Duke Wu’s grandson?” Gu Fuzhou asked.

“Yes,” Lin Qingyu said. “Do you know of him?”

“I’ve seen him once or twice. He’s quite handsome, and he’s one of General Gu’s admirers. The novel’s bonus chapters mentioned him—the part he was in was brief, but the novel said that he fulfilled Gu Fuzhou’s dying wish and destroyed Western Xia within a decade. At one point, I wanted to recommend him to go to the northwest, but he was too young and immature. In the original novel, he lost several battles in his youth because of his fickle temperament. It wasn’t until he turned twenty-five that he slowly improved and showed talent as a general.”

“Seventeen,” Lin Qingyu said. “The same age you were when you came to Great Yu.”

Gu Fuzhou smiled. “Yeah. When I was seventeen, I was still playing with pet birds at the manor, and playing pitch-pot. But he’s already thinking of making a mark on the battlefield. I can’t possibly compare to him.”

“Do you want him to go?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“With his current experience, he can’t lead the main army,” Gu Fuzhou replied. “He could lead a vanguard with no issue, though.”

After weighing the options, Lin Qingyu said, “If he wants to go, take him with you. If he stays in the capital and never experiences hardship, he won’t reach the peak the original novel described. When you arrive in the northwest, you should keep an eye on him and keep him from returning to his old way of acting rashly and impulsively.”

Gu Fuzhou noticed the key point in what Lin Qingyu had said. “So you agree that I should go?”

“Whether I agree or not, you’d go anyway,” Lin Qingyu whispered.

Gu Fuzhou chuckled. “You’re rational after all, Qingyu.”

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During court the next morning, Gu Fuzhou got down on one knee in the hall. “Great Yu is currently in grave danger,” he said solemnly. “I am willing to put my life on the line to ensure the safety of the northwest. I, Gu Fuzhou, request to go to battle.”

As soon as he spoke the words, the other military officials were overjoyed. Wu Zhan clenched his fists with excitement. “I knew it! I knew it! What did I say? Great General Gu won’t just shrug this off!”

“With General Gu in the northwest, we’re sure to reclaim Yongliang in no time!”

“Great General Gu, you must cut out those Western Xia scoundrels’ tongues to avenge General Zhao!”

While Duke Wu wore a gratified smile, Xi Rong’s lips curled into a cold one, a calculating gaze flashing across his face.

Even the empress dowager seemed relieved that Gu Fuzhou had volunteered to go to war. Everyone was thrilled—except for Lin Qingyu, who stood behind the dragon throne, looking down at the ministers icily.

The emperor, pleased, immediately approved Gu Fuzhou’s request and appointed Wu Youyuan as the vanguard of the expedition.

Not much time was left before the date on which Western Xia had said they would massacre the citizens, so the emperor gave Gu Fuzhou three days to prepare. After that, the great general would lead reinforcements from the capital to the northwest.

Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou each had their own tasks to attend to before the departure. The servants on night duty hadn’t brought their masters hot water for a while, which meant they were focused on matters that didn’t require it.

Gloom hadn’t yet befallen the general’s manor, but the atmosphere was cold. Huantong and most of the other male servants assumed that the general was going to war in lofty spirits, and that he could return victorious, while girls like Hualu worried that the general would get hurt on the battlefield—after all, the general’s existing injuries hadn’t come from nowhere. However, they couldn’t do much but sew his battlefield robes stitch by stitch.

At the manor, Lin Qingyu reached out to two people. One was Hu Ji, a physician who’d once attended exclusively to the deposed crown prince and Lady Chen. After those two and the emperor were gone, the late emperor’s consorts had moved to Jinyang Palace. Now, there were no more concubines, princes, or princesses living in the palace, so Hu Ji was rather idle. He spent most of his time treating palace maids and eunuchs.

Lin Qingyu asked Hu Ji whether he’d be willing to go on the expedition as a military physician, and Hu Ji agreed immediately. The northwest had just suffered a major defeat with countless casualties, and they needed to add new people to their ranks. As a physician, Hu Ji would readily go wherever he was needed. Among his peers, Hu Ji possessed outstanding medical skills, and he was Lin Qingyu’s longtime friend. Lin Qingyu knew that he could be trusted.

Afterward, Lin Qingyu wrote a letter and asked Zhang Shiquan to take it to Zhu Yongxin in Xu Prefecture. When Shen Huaishi had bade Lin Qingyu farewell, he'd said that if he was needed in the future, Zhu Yongxin would know where he was.

Shen Huaishi was an excellent martial artist, but not a great military tactician. All his learning throughout his life had been limited to the assassination and protection skills required by the imperial shadow guards. Still, if he was willing to go to the northwest to help Gu Fuzhou, Lin Qingyu would feel much more at ease.

As Lin Qingyu exhausted himself with these preparations, the generals threw Gu Fuzhou a farewell party in the Iron Cavalry's camp. Alcohol wasn't allowed there, so they roasted a fat, freshly slaughtered sheep and drank tea instead of wine as they wished the general a triumphant victory and quick return.

From their faces, it seemed they really believed that Gu Fuzhou—who'd never been defeated—could solve all the northwest's problems.

Duke Wu patted Gu Fuzhou's shoulder. "I'll leave my useless grandson to you, Fuzhou. He's been learning military tactics from me since he was a child, so he does have some skill. It's his first time going to war, so I don't ask for achievements; I merely hope that he doesn't burden you."

Gu Fuzhou smiled and acknowledged Duke Wu, but he was thinking that Wu Youyuan should quickly develop his military skills so that Gu Fuzhou could win without lifting a finger.

"I'm sorry, General. I shouldn't have said that you were…were…" Wu Zhan sighed, then said guiltily, "I hope you won't nurse a grudge against a brute like me."

"I won't," Gu Fuzhou said. "But I'll need you to stay in the capital to help me with something."

"I'll do as you command, General—even if it costs my life!"

Gu Fuzhou gave him a look. Wu Zhan understood, and they walked away from the crowd to a secluded area.

"I'm going to the northwest, and I don't know when I'll return. I'm worried about my spouse in the capital," Gu Fuzhou said.

“You’re talking about Imperial Physician Lin?” Wu Zhan didn’t understand. “Both the emperor and the empress dowager favor him—what could happen to him?”

“I hope I’m just worrying too much,” Gu Fuzhou said slowly. “But just in case, I want to leave him a ‘knife’ in the capital as protection.”

“A ‘knife’?” Wu Zhan looked confused. “General, just say it. I’m not good at reading between the lines.”

Gu Fuzhou lowered his voice. “I want you to hide troops in the capital for me.”

The passionate, burly men attending the party weren’t satisfied after drinking tea, so someone suggested that they learn from scholars and book a pleasure boat on the Jinshui River, order a couple of pots of wine, and hire some beautiful singers for everyone to enjoy. Everyone agreed, and they wanted to ask Great General Gu for his opinion—but he couldn’t be found in the barracks.

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Gu Fuzhou stepped into the courtyard, took off his cloak, and tossed it to a servant. “Qingyu, I’m stuffed. I ate half a leg of lamb all by myself today!”

Lin Qingyu stood in front of the table, smiling. “Luckily, the kitchen didn’t prepare much tonight—just a bowl of longevity noodles. You should still be able to finish them.”

“Longevity noodles?” Stepping forward, Gu Fuzhou saw two bowls of steaming noodles on the table. Chopped green onions and soft-boiled eggs floated on top. “Oh…it’s almost my birthday.”

“You’ll have to mark your real twentieth birthday on the road,” Lin Qingyu said. “So it’s fine if we celebrate it two days early.”

Gu Fuzhou lowered his head and kissed Lin Qingyu’s forehead. “I’m happy. Thanks, darling. I’ll go wash my hands.”

As Lin Qingyu watched Gu Fuzhou turn around, his smile faded—yet when the general came back, he smiled again. They sat down.

“Careful with the chopsticks—don’t break the noodles,” Lin Qingyu warned.

Gu Fuzhou laughed. “When did you start to believe in these things?”

Lin Qingyu stayed quiet for a while. No, he’d never believed in those superstitions about noodles granting long life before. “Probably after Lu Wancheng died.”

Gu Fuzhou paused, picked up his chopsticks, and smiled. “I’ll eat them in one go, then.”

As they ate, Huantong came in to report that the young master of Duke Wu’s manor wanted to see them.

“Is it Wu Youyuan?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“It should be.” Gu Fuzhou wiped his mouth with a handkerchief and told Huantong, “Ask him to wait in the front hall. I’ll be right there.”

“I’ll go with you,” Lin Qingyu said.

The handsome seventeen-year-old wore the armor of an imperial guard. He was full of vigor and life, as if he had endless energy. When he saw Gu Fuzhou, he didn’t bother greeting him; instead he rushed to say, “General, I thought of a strategy that might break the Western Xia army’s Earth and Fire Array!”

Before he could finish, Wu Youyuan saw the man behind the general. He stared for a moment, acting as though he’d bitten his tongue.

Gu Fuzhou raised a brow. “Beautiful, isn’t he?”

Lin Qingyu gave Gu Fuzhou a warning look.

“Yes. Beautiful.” Wu Youyuan nodded blankly.

“That’s right.” Everyone loved to look at a beauty; Gu Fuzhou wouldn’t get jealous over something trivial like that. After all, if he’d been jealous of every person whose gaze lingered on Lin Qingyu, then he would have done nothing but felt jealous all the time. “Greet my wife.”

Coming back to his senses, Wu Youyuan bowed, saying, “Greetings, Lady.”

“Did you come to discuss military strategy with me?” Gu Fuzhou asked.

When Wu Youyuan remembered the purpose of his trip, it rekindled his excitement. “Yes! General, the Earth and Fire Array seems impenetrable, but it has a tiny flaw…”

“Why don’t you take young General Wu to the study, General?” Lin Qingyu said to Gu Fuzhou.

“Sure,” Gu Fuzhou said helplessly, then told Wu Youyuan, “Come with me.”

After sending them to the study, Lin Qingyu had Hualu serve them tea, then went to the apothecary.

This was the night before Gu Fuzhou would go to war. The great general wanted to spend a nice evening with his beautiful spouse—maybe even get up to something—but, unexpectedly, he had to listen to Wu Youyuan go on and on about military strategy for two hours. Wu Youyuan reluctantly said goodbye only when he saw that curfew was approaching.

When Gu Fuzhou returned to their room, Lin Qingyu had just finished bathing and was rubbing his hair dry with a hand towel. Gu Fuzhou came up behind him, took the towel from his hand casually, and sighed. “I remember a cliché from my hometown: ‘The hot-blooded passion and poems of youth have just begun.’”

Letting Gu Fuzhou dry his long hair for him, Lin Qingyu asked, “Who are you talking about?”

“Wu Youyuan, of course.”

“What about you? Aren’t *you* still a youth?”

“I don’t think so,” Gu Fuzhou said dejectedly. “Seeing seventeen-year-old Wu Youyuan made me realize I’m old now.”

“In reality, you’re only twenty,” Lin Qingyu reminded him.

Gu Fuzhou sighed. “It’s because this body doesn’t have an ounce of youthfulness. What else could it be? My mentality has aged too.”

“It hasn’t.”

“Hmm?”

“Even in the body of a thirty-three-year-old, I still sense that so-called youthfulness in you.”

Gu Fuzhou didn’t reply. He just looked at Lin Qingyu, smiling.

Lin Qingyu glanced at him. “Why are you looking at me?”

“You’re so good at flirting and saying romantic things,” Gu Fuzhou said, meeting Lin Qingyu’s gaze in the bronze mirror. “It’s the first time falling in love for both of us, so how are your words so sweet?”

“I’m just telling the truth. How come it’s turned into flirting for you?”

“You’re too good at it—seriously!” Gu Fuzhou exclaimed. “Say some more. I love listening to you.”

When Lin Qingyu’s hair was almost dry, Gu Fuzhou asked, “By the way, where’s my Qingyun Jiuzhou spear?”

“It should still be collecting dust in the corner,” Lin Qingyu replied.

A normal person couldn’t lift that spear even with both hands, but Gu Fuzhou did it with one. “It’s still pretty easy. Lifting weights for two hours every day was worth it.”

Lin Qingyu frowned. “But didn’t you say that you’ll just be in the tent, making plans?”

“I’ll still have to raise the spear sometimes to look cool in front of the soldiers. If I look confused and lost, they’ll lose respect for me.”

Lin Qingyu stayed with Gu Fuzhou as he cleaned his spear under the light. Suddenly, Lin Qingyu said, “I’ll go to the northwest with you.”

As soon as he finished saying the words, he began to regret them. Given the current situation, Xi Rong—calculating as he was—would probably arrange it so that after they returned from Yongliang, there was no longer a place for them in the capital. Gu Fuzhou needed to fight in the northwest, and Lin Qingyu needed to be in charge in the capital; that was the only way the delicate balance between both sides could be maintained.

Luckily, Gu Fuzhou didn’t take him seriously. “You wouldn’t go.”

“How do you know?”

“I know, because my Physician Lin’s brain isn’t love-addled.” Gu Fuzhou nodded.

Lin Qingyu said, “I wish it was.” He wished they could be just like Jingchun and the North King, not caring about anything except being with each other forever, never separated.

“I don’t.” Gu Fuzhou looked at him with a smile full of affection and admiration. “‘Living as long as the heavens and earth, and glowing as bright as the sun and the moon.’ That’s my Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu chuckled. “If you’re so familiar with *Nine Pieces*,[24] why can’t you memorize the *Book of Odes*?”

Gu Fuzhou knew that Lin Qingyu was referring to his husband’s failed confession during the Lantern Festival. “This is different,” he said, smiling. “Back then, you made me nervous.”

He recalled that day’s events so well; it seemed as if it had happened only yesterday. The city was full of colorful lanterns, the crowds swelled, laughter spilled over…and Lin Qingyu said, “I have a crush on you too.”

Staring at the sharp tip of his spear, Gu Fuzhou murmured, “Qingyu, do you think…I’ll do well?”

“Don’t think about that before you leave. Think about what you *can* do well instead.”

“Like?”

Lin Qingyu stood up. “Put down your spear,” he ordered.

Gu Fuzhou did as he was told.

Lin Qingyu approached him slowly, the flickering candlelight blurring his figure as if he were walking through mist. He lifted his hand to untie his sash. His robe slid down to his ankles, revealing the entirety of his fair, lean body to Gu Fuzhou.

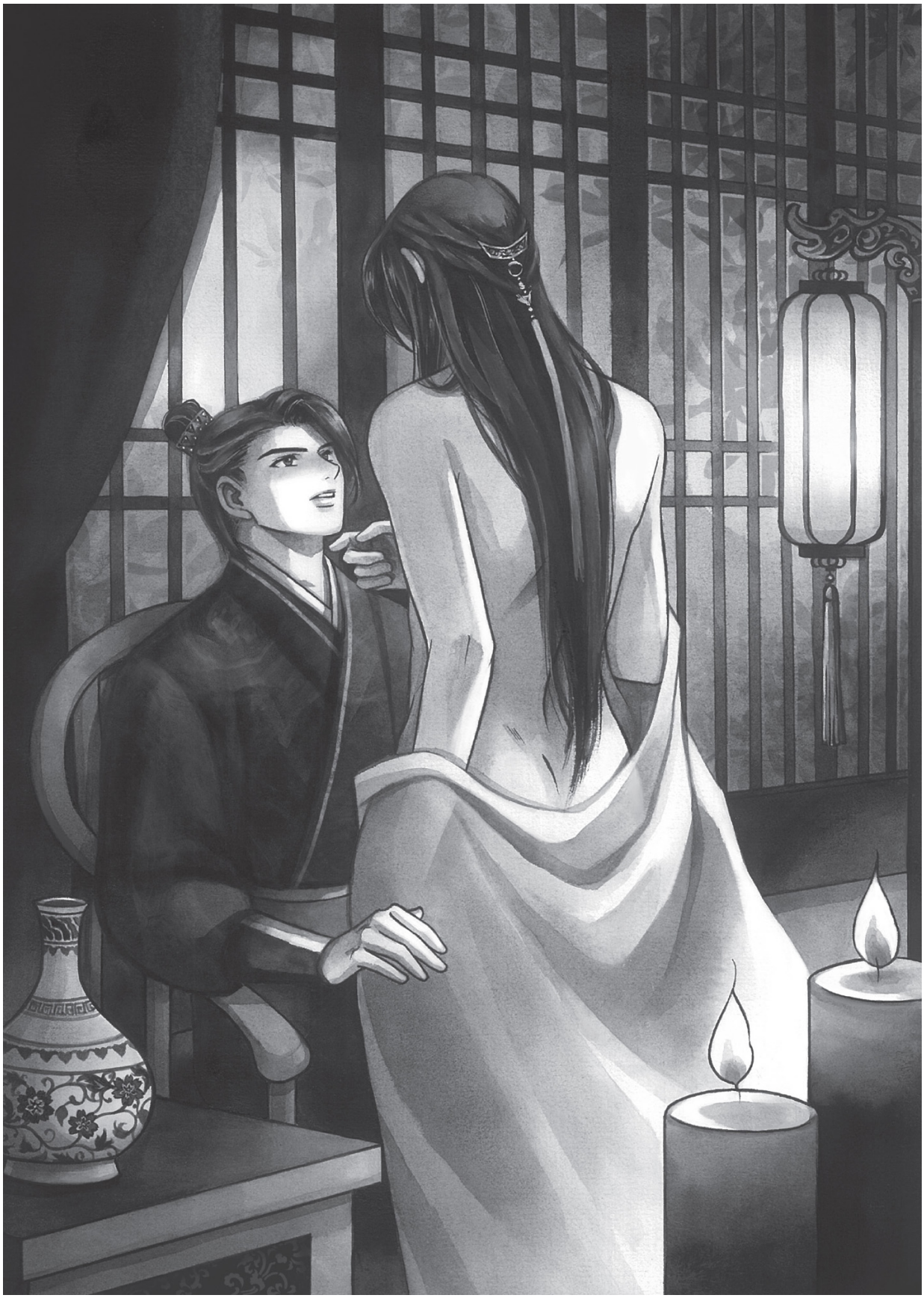
His skin was as fair as jade, his nipples like cherry blossoms, and his long hair cascaded down his beautiful back. He was as ethereal as an immortal, his beauty unparalleled.

“Give me your hand,” Lin Qingyu said.

Gu Fuzhou’s gaze darkened slightly, and his breathing quickened, but he smiled. “What are you doing, darling—seducing me?”

“No.” Lin Qingyu opened Gu Fuzhou’s hand and placed a jar of ointment he had personally prepared onto his palm. “I’m…inviting you.”

Gu Fuzhou’s pupils dilated, and he remained motionless, as though nailed to his chair. He forced himself to lower his eyes, but Lin Qingyu grabbed his chin and made him look; he had no choice but to stare at the naked beauty.



“If you think it’ll be tiring, then I’ll do it myself.”

“Or maybe you can…invite me after I’m back?” Gu Fuzhou said with difficulty.

“Why do we need to wait until you’re back?” Lin Qingyu suddenly seemed a bit agitated. “Is it…the same reason you wouldn’t tell me your name in my dream that year?”

Worried Lin Qingyu would catch a cold, Gu Fuzhou took a fox-fur coat hanging nearby and draped it around him. “Of course not. Think about it—I’ll be gone for half a year at least, and at most, three to five years. If you give me a first taste of it now, then force me to go hungry in the northwest, I won’t survive! I’d rather hold back this once. Like you said, it’s more painful to gain something and lose it than never to have had it in the first place.”

Gu Fuzhou’s words would’ve been amusing, if not for the last sentence. Lin Qingyu calmed down a little, but he looked a bit sad. Gu Fuzhou could tell that Lin Qingyu didn’t believe him—he was just pretending to.

Neither said anything. Gu Fuzhou carried Lin Qingyu to bed and wrapped him tightly in a quilt. Lin Qingyu didn’t resist; he averted his gaze, looking helpless.

Suddenly, as though he’d thought of something, he grabbed Gu Fuzhou’s collar. “You wrote me a pledge,” he said anxiously.

“Yes, I did.” Gu Fuzhou got into bed, wrapping the fragile beauty in his arms. “If I’m lying, you can go to the underworld and get me back.”

Lin Qingyu whispered, “I really want to lock you up and hide you away, so that you can’t go anywhere. That way, you’ll always be by my side, and you’ll only look at me.”

Gu Fuzhou lifted Lin Qingyu’s face and examined his expression. The ruthless beauty looked to be at a loss; his eyes were wet, as if he were holding back tears. Gu Fuzhou held him tighter, smiling. “That’s all I could ever want. You’d better find a chain to fetter me with, so that beyond eating, drinking, and sleeping, I can only do things with you.”

Lin Qingyu forced a smile and clung to Gu Fuzhou even harder. “Good idea.” A moment later, he finally made up his mind. “I’m letting you leave—you can go. But you have to come back. You *have* to.”

In moments like these, Gu Fuzhou didn’t have much to say. He stroked Lin Qingyu’s long hair and simply replied, “All right.”

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During a light snowfall in the first year of the Chuxi reign, Gu Fuzhou began to lead his army toward the war zone. The emperor, along with all his civil and military officials, bade farewell to the great general at the city gates.

Looking up, Gu Fuzhou saw Lin Qingyu standing behind Xiao Jie atop the gates, almost at eye level with the emperor. Lin Qingyu wore a sky-blue court robe, a snow-white cloak, and a white mink stole around his neck. His aura was as cold as the moon, but the morning sun cast a warm glow on him, so his face looked as though it was stained light red. His eyes were bright, a hidden brilliance within.

When their eyes met, Lin Qingyu opened his red lips slightly and said something.

Gu Fuzhou could only hear the wind blowing, but he could tell what Lin Qingyu had said: *“I’ll wait for your return…”*

After that, Lin Qingyu said one last word. From the shape of his lips, it didn’t look like “general,” “husband,” or “Fuzhou.”

Gu Fuzhou gave it some thought; then the corner of his mouth curled up. He pulled on his reins to turn his horse’s head, telling Wu Youyuan beside him, “Let’s go.”

A team of elite imperial guards followed them as they left the capital in a vast and powerful procession.

The great general never looked back after that. Regardless of whether he’d been forced to leave, regardless of the odds, he was as carefree as always, just like…just like when he’d said goodbye to Lin Qingyu in his dream.

He didn’t look back at all.

Amid the sound of horns, zithers, and sorrowful songs, the warriors rode on horseback, their flags half furled. The general fought countless battles along the way, and his fierceness in the fray went down in history.

In that moment, one should smile for the young hero, not cry over the pain of separation. In time, thousands of miles separated the couple. The only hope was that, in the middle of a hundred battles, the great general still wouldn’t forget his hometown—and that, in the long night, someone was waiting for him to return.

Chapter 90

HALF A MONTH LATER, Gu Fuzhou arrived in the northwest, and Lin Qingyu had been separated from him once more. The only consolation was that they could write to each other this time—a special privilege the emperor had granted them.

Every report sent from the northwest to the capital came with a letter General Gu had written to his wife, and both landed on Lin Qingyu's desk as soon as possible.

Though the report and letter were written by the same person, they were written in totally different styles. The report was concise and properly worded, speaking only of military affairs. At present, the Western Xia army—led by the Ghost Commander—was unstoppable. After Yongliang, they'd taken several more important northwestern towns. At least the morale of Great Yu's army had stabilized and improved once Gu Fuzhou led reinforcements to the northwest.

Under the Western Xia army's fierce onslaught, Great Yu's army defended the capital of Gui Prefecture, the last line of defense in the northwest. If Gui Prefecture fell, the nation's northwestern region would be wide open, and Western Xia could choose either to retreat to the Jiangnan plains or march straight to the capital.

Gu Fuzhou had a lot of experience defending a city. He was, after all, a man who could climb straight out of bed and ascend a city gate to command his troops with a blanket draped over his shoulders. Great Yu's northwest army and reinforcements had worked together to stop the Western Xia army outside the capital of Gui Prefecture, temporarily halting their advance.

The great general's report was written simply, mentioning only the results, not the details of the process. But looking at the number of casualties, everyone could tell how harrowing the situation was.

In contrast, Gu Fuzhou's letters to his wife went like this:

Qingyu, you won't believe this, but ever since I got to the northwest, I haven't slept in even once. See how determined I am to return victorious?

After meeting with the generals in the evening, I walked out of the tent and saw the bright stars of the northwest. I suddenly felt that it would be nice to have you by my side.

Western Xia's Ghost Commander is quite good at what he does. I don't feel like I'm an equal match for him. But Wu Youyuan seems confident, and he can talk about military strategy for four hours a day. I listened to him carefully—and then started to lose my hair in clumps.

Qingyu, counting the last time I was in the northwest, I've now won six times in a row. I feel like my first defeat is imminent. Help.

For some reason, Gu Fuzhou's complaints about the Ghost Commander's skill, and his whining that he was outmatched, didn't worry Lin Qingyu much. That was Gu Fuzhou's normal tone. He didn't deliver any good news, yet that somehow made others believe in him. He'd always been like that—despite his laziness and reluctance, he did everything as well as he could.

Gu Fuzhou had given Lin Qingyu peace of mind, but never through his words. This time…should be the same.

No—it *had to* be the same.

***

Lin Qingyu celebrated the new year without fanfare. Like in previous years, Yuan Yin hung red silk lanterns all over the manor, pasted paper flowers on the windows, and had the kitchen prepare a lavish New Year's Eve dinner. However, Lin Qingyu's heart wasn't in it; he ate only a few mouthfuls before going back to his room to rest.

Inside was the big bed that Gu Fuzhou had so carefully chosen. To reduce the number of times he got up at night, Gu Fuzhou had asked the carpenter to make a wooden table that matched the bed. He put tea on the table every night; that way, if he woke up thirsty, he could just lean over and drink.

Lin Qingyu lay on the bed, his limbs cold. However thick his quilt was, his body wouldn't warm up.

A couple of hours after midnight, he gave up on sleeping. He got out of bed, put on a fox-fur coat, and walked to the table with a candle to write down what was on his mind:

The mandarin duck tiles are heavy with frost.

The jade-green quilt is cold.

Who is here to share it with me?[25]

My first wish is that you, my husband, will live a thousand years.

My second wish is that I, your wife, will enjoy enduring good health.

Third, I wish for us to live like two swallows perched side by side,

And be with each other for eternity…[26]

But in the end, those were nothing but beautiful wishes.

When he finished, Lin Qingyu grew distracted for a moment, looking up toward the northwest.

The candle burned out, and he sat alone until dawn.

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On the third day of the new year, a number of people came to the general's manor to greet Lin Qingyu. Unlike last year, when mainly military officials had visited, a lot of civil officials also came by. After the new emperor ascended the throne, the capital's noble families came to realize that not only was Gu Fuzhou a powerful man, but his wife was formidable in his own right. He was technically merely a fifth-rank imperial physician, but "grand mentor of the emperor" would be a more fitting title for Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu rebuffed most of the visitors named on the cards handed to him, but some he needed to meet: for example, Wu Zhan, Gu Fuzhou's right-hand man in the army.

Wu Zhan was still thinking about the rude scoldings he'd given the general. He'd come to give New Year's greetings and apologize, and the gifts he brought took up half a courtyard. "These are all tokens of our regard," he said. "Please accept our sincerity, Lady."

"Of course," Lin Qingyu said, still polite. "Please have a seat, General Wu. Hualu, bring some tea."

Wu Zhan drank the tea, but he still felt uneasy. He and Gu Fuzhou were both soldiers, and they were used to informality—either would apologize openly if needed. But in front of him, Lin Qingyu was staring at him indifferently, and now the words of apology became too embarrassing to say.

"You seem to have something to say, General Wu," Lin Qingyu remarked.

Wu Zhan took a risk. "Um, before the general went to battle, I impulsively insulted him. Later, I realized I'd misunderstood him. I still feel incredibly guilty…"

"Did you tell the general this?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"I did. He told me that he wouldn't hold a grudge against me."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "In that case, I won't either."

Wu Zhan breathed a sigh of relief and smiled. "Don't worry, Lady. Next time, I'll control my explosive temper. If I speak to him like that again, I'll go feed the horses for three months."

Lin Qingyu asked, "General Wu, you said you insulted the general impulsively. Where did that impulse come from?"

"It actually wasn't really an impulse," Wu Zhan said guiltily. "I was a bit angry when I learned that the general didn't seem worried about the dire situation in the northwest. Duke Wu didn't think that was like the general either, but we thought that he might have reasons of his own for it. So we only discussed it casually, in private—we didn't think Prime Minister Cui would hear us."

Prime Minister Cui Lian was over fifty years old, and he had been a minister close to the previous emperor. When Xiao Cheng was regent, he'd

trusted Cui Lian as well. But the court officials still respected him, so Lin Qingyu had no intention of disposing of him right now.

“What did the prime minister say that upset you so much?”

“He said that we didn’t understand the general. That the general had fought for Great Yu for over a decade, and now that he had a beautiful wife, it was understandable that he wanted to spend more time with his wife in comfort and pleasure. That Western Xia’s military advisor was full of tricks, and the great general was only an ordinary man—how could he possibly compete with a ‘ghost’? He said it was normal for the general to want to retreat, so we shouldn’t be too harsh on him.”

“He was speaking well of the general?” Lin Qingyu found that strange.

“Y-yes.” Thinking back, Wu Zhan realized that was strange. “He even said that, after years of fighting, the general deserved to dream of a peaceful capital. With every word he said, he took the general’s side. But it angered us just to listen to it, and I couldn’t help running to the military barracks… Ah, I did the wrong thing.”

Lin Qingyu sank deep into thought. Had Cui Lian voiced his own thoughts, or had someone instructed him to say such things? He’d thought that the old minister knew his place…but it looked like he’d need to do a bad thing on his own again.

“Lady, why was the general reluctant to go to the northwest?” Wu Zhan asked. “Was it really because he couldn’t bear to leave the wealthy, prosperous capital? I don’t believe it!”

Lin Qingyu glanced at Wu Zhan. “He felt that not going to battle, nor interfering with the northwest, was his responsibility to the three hundred thousand soldiers and the common people.”

Wu Zhan was shocked. “Why would he think that? The great general is Great Yu’s war god! The soldiers trust him so much!”

“And he went, in the end, because of your trust,” Lin Qingyu said coldly. “Even if no one else urged him to, he would still have gone.”

Jiang-gongzi was different from Lin Qingyu, after all. Deep down, he was still a compassionate young man.

After seeing Wu Zhan off, Lin Qingyu ordered Hualu to prepare a substantial gift and had Yuan Yin prepare a carriage. Since Cui Lian was willing to speak well of his husband, Lin Qingyu obviously had to go to the prime minister's manor to thank him.

When the fifth-rank imperial physician's visiting card was delivered to the prime minister's manor, everyone panicked as if they'd received an imperial edict from the empress dowager herself.

Cui Lian personally welcomed Lin Qingyu into the main hall, serving him the best tea. The prime minister's attitude was neither warm nor cold—just distantly polite.

"I didn't think that you'd come visit me in my residence, Imperial Physician Lin," Cui Lian said. "I wonder when I caught your attention."

"To be honest, I had no such intention at first," Lin Qingyu replied. "But I heard that you spoke well of the general before he left, so I came to thank you."

Cui Lian's expression didn't change, but the hand holding his teacup froze. "The general has worked hard and achieved much. He suffered great injuries for the sake of Great Yu. I couldn't bear to see him go to war again so reluctantly."

"But I recall that, in an earlier memorial, you said that only the general could lead the army in the northwest," Lin Qingyu replied slowly. "I wonder why you changed your mind."

Cui Lian was speechless for a moment, but he recovered quickly. "Memorial? I didn't submit a memorial recommending the general for that," he said calmly. "Have you misremembered, Imperial Physician Lin?"

"If you didn't submit one," Lin Qingyu said with a small smile, "then I may have misremembered."

A beauty's smile should please the eyes, but Cui Lian felt terrified. In fact, he had submitted such a memorial, but only the emperor had seen it. Did Lin Qingyu really know something? Or was he trying to deceive Cui Lian?

Before the prime minister could ponder it too long, Lin Qingyu stood and bade him farewell. "Prime Minister Cui, you're a senior official whose

tenure spans two dynasties—a pillar of the nation," he remarked. "I hope you'll think twice before taking action. You wouldn't want to do something stupid."

After Lin Qingyu left, Cui Lian felt uneasy. After much thought, he went to the palace on his day off. The emperor had already gone to bed, so Eunuch Xi met with him. The first time the emperor had met with Cui Lian, His Majesty had said that Xi Rong's intentions were his intentions, and that the prime minister could treat Xi Rong as he would the emperor.

Cui Lian told Xi Rong everything that happened. "Eunuch Xi, the memorial I wrote to the emperor advocating that General Gu lead the army…"

"Don't worry, Prime Minister. The emperor burned it after he read it—Imperial Physician Lin couldn't have seen it."

Cui Lian was still fearful. "Then he was trying to trick me! How cunning. It's impossible to defend yourself from him!"

Xi Rong's lip curled up. "By coming to the palace to ask for an audience with the emperor on your day off, haven't you effectively told Imperial Physician Lin that you have something to hide?"

Realizing this, Cui Lian was immediately vexed. "I didn't think of that!"

"Don't blame yourself, Prime Minister," Xi Rong said. He seemed interested. "Imperial Physician Lin knew long ago. You've just provided him with evidence. But even if there wasn't evidence, he was already convinced of the facts."

"You mean he knew already?"

Xi Rong narrowed his eyes. "He visited you before to get answers from you. Tomorrow, it'll be my turn."

A young eunuch came in search of Xi Rong. "Eunuch Xi, the emperor's awake and looking for you."

"Thank you for your concern, Prime Minister. Leave everything to me," Xi Rong said before hurrying to the emperor's room.

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During the Lantern Festival, Lin Qingyu received another letter from Gu Fuzhou.

Seven consecutive victories, darling. Wu Youyuan has made great contributions, as you'd expect of the man who will defeat Western Xia. But he seems to be getting cocky, always thinking he can fight one-on-five. Still, it's not a huge problem; I'll keep him from acting too reckless.

Happy first anniversary of confessing our feelings.

Gu Fuzhou had written his latest letter at New Year's, and it was delivered to Lin Qingyu on the day they had confessed their love to each other.

Lin Qingyu smiled a bit and put the letter away, placing it with the ring Gu Fuzhou had given him.

That afternoon, eunuchs from Ci'an Palace came to deliver a message from the empress dowager. She was inviting Lin Qingyu to celebrate the Lantern Festival with her in the palace, and to ascend the gate tower to enjoy the lanterns after sunset.

Chapter 91

THE LANTERN FESTIVAL PARADE started that evening. Wanting to discuss Cui Lian with the empress dowager, Lin Qingyu entered the palace early.

The emperor was a filial man, so everything in Ci'an Palace was of the best quality. He knew the empress dowager liked chrysanthemums, so he'd ordered dozens of chrysanthemum-shaped lanterns made and had them placed in the courtyard. As soon as the sky darkened, the colorful lanterns bloomed splendidly in the snow, evoking the liveliness of spring.

Laifu looked at the sea of flowers and smiled. "The emperor cares about you, Empress Dowager."

The empress dowager wasn't very enthusiastic. "I'm his legal mother, but we haven't been particularly close to each other as mother and son in over twenty years. It's just for show. Besides, considering how the emperor is, how could *he* have thought of something like this? I think his eunuch gave him the idea."

When Lin Qingyu got to Ci'an Palace, the kitchen had just cooked a pot of sweet dumplings, and the empress dowager was sampling them with the prince of Huai. When Laifu reported to her, the empress dowager treated Lin Qingyu with familiarity and had Laifu invite him in.

Lin Qingyu entered the inner hall, where he saw the empress dowager and Xiao Li sitting at the table. Xiao Li had obviously been carefully dressed; he wore a commandery prince's robe emblazoned with a five-clawed dragon, and a jade pendant dangled from his lean waist. He hadn't yet reached his full height, and his beautiful facial features were youthfully delicate; still, he was uniquely handsome. He should've been a gorgeous and cheerful young man, but instead he had empty eyes and a dazed look, with no trace of life in him.

Lin Qingyu bowed to them. "Greetings, Your Majesty, Your Highness."

“You’re here, Qingyu,” the empress dowager said pleasantly. “Quick—bring some sweet dumplings for Imperial Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu wasn’t used to being called by his given name by anyone other than his family and his husband. This year, however, he and the empress dowager had worked together on several top-secret matters that couldn’t be leaked to outsiders. Thus, it could be said that they were in the same boat—they would prosper together and suffer together. Whether she was sincere with him or not, she certainly treated him better now than when he was Lu Wancheng’s wife.

Lin Qingyu declined. “I had some at home already. I wouldn’t want to be a bother.”

“You can have more,” the empress dowager insisted. “How could a man like you not even have a bowl of sweet dumplings? There’s only Li-er and me in Ci’an Palace, so it’s always a little too quiet. You were my late nephew’s wife, after all, and Li-er’s cousin-in-law, so you’re family. There are no outsiders here; there’s no need to be so polite.”

At the empress dowager’s words, Lin Qingyu sat down as he was told. He tried one of the steaming sweet dumplings in front of him. The outside, made from glutinous rice flour, was sweet and soft, but the sesame seed filling was a little too sweet.

The empress dowager was so busy caring for Xiao Li that she didn’t have time to eat. If she let Xiao Li feed himself, he would grab the dumplings with his hands and shove them into his mouth. There was a servant woman in Ci’an Palace in charge of feeding Xiao Li, but the empress dowager fed him as well.

As soon as they held a sweet dumpling next to his mouth, Xiao Li opened his mouth and ate it, chewing slowly. Although he was mentally handicapped, he didn’t look messy when eating.

Watching Xiao Li eat the sweet dumplings one after another, the servant woman who took care of him smiled. “Our little prince loves these. Look how happy he is.”

From her words, one would have thought that she was talking about a newborn not yet a year old. How could she tell Xiao Li was happy? There

was no expression on his face. Such words could only appease the empress dowager.

The empress dowager, who loved her son more than anything, really did believe those words. She gently asked, “Li-er, do you like sweet dumplings?”

Xiao Li opened his lips slightly, staring at the spoon in his mother’s hands.

“Li-er, call me ‘Mother,’ and I’ll feed it to you. Li-er, say ‘Mother.’ ‘Mo-ther.’” The empress dowager was patient with him. “Repeat after me, Li-er. ‘Mo-ther.’”

Xiao Li seemed to be in another world, unable to hear her words or respond to them.

Lin Qingyu said, “They’re tasty, but he shouldn’t eat too many.”

The empress dowager’s hand dropped. “Forget it, then. Take all this away.”

Xiao Li didn’t cry or throw a tantrum when he couldn’t eat the dumplings anymore. He slowly lowered his head and sank back into his own world.

The empress dowager sighed softly, unable to hide her disappointment. “Li-er is sixteen now, but his mind is still like that of a three- or four-year-old child, and he can’t speak like other children… I don’t know if I’ll ever hear him say ‘Mother’ in my life.”

“Can the prince make sounds?” Lin Qingyu asked. He didn’t recall ever hearing Xiao Li’s voice before.

“The imperial preceptor said that Li-er has all five senses, but he can’t react to things, because there’s no soul in his body.” The empress dowager smiled bitterly. “He also said that those without a soul often look as beautiful as spirits. Luckily, Li-er is from the imperial family. If he’d been an ordinary person with such a face, I don’t know how much suffering he would have gone through.”

“The young prince’s looks are truly exceptional,” Lin Qingyu said.

The empress dowager glanced at him. “Not as much as yours.”

“He’s still young. He hasn’t grown into his features yet.”

“What’s the use of a pretty appearance? I’d rather he was plain.”

The maid took away the sweet dumplings and brought some seasonal fruits to relieve heaviness and aid in digestion. At that point, Lin Qingyu brought up Cui Lian. “Have you ever seen a memorial submitted by Prime Minister Cui regarding the appointment of a commander in the northwest?”

The empress dowager sorted through her memories. “No. I remember that when he came to court, his feelings on the matter seemed vague and difficult to pin down.”

“I’ve read all memorials about the northwest, but none from Prime Minister Cui,” Lin Qingyu said. “It seems as though someone hid it, wanting to use him to stir trouble among the military officials.”

Lin Qingyu and the empress dowager knew who that was.

“When all’s said and done, he’s unwilling to be controlled by others.” The empress dowager took off her fingernail guard to peel a tangerine with her own hands. “There’s something I don’t quite understand.”

“Please elaborate, Empress Dowager.”

“You already seem to know that he won’t willingly remain under our control. Why did you give him a chance?”

Lin Qingyu replied, “At that point, the current emperor was the only choice left among the late emperor’s three living sons, aside from the deposed crown prince. Forgive my bluntness, but if we’d supported the prince of Huai instead, the civil and military officials might not have believed the late emperor’s will. And what would Western Xia and the North Kingdom have thought if they knew that Great Yu’s future emperor was mentally deficient? Our only choice was His Majesty. But he isn’t interested in governing the nation, and I needed Xi Rong to help him with the political achievements that allowed him to be pushed onto the throne without bringing chaos to the court.”

“I understand.” The empress dowager wiped Xiao Li’s mouth gently with a handkerchief. “You did well, and the emperor ascended the throne smoothly. In the future, you and I will take care of the nation. There’s no need for Xi Rong to live, is there?”

Lin Qingyu smiled. “No, Empress Dowager. But Xi Rong isn’t an ordinary person. He’d already roped in the prime minister, and the emperor greatly values him. If we’re rash, we may alert the enemy.”

The empress dowager snorted coldly. “He’s just a eunuch. So what if we alert him?”

To her, Xi Rong was merely capable of petty tricks; he couldn’t cause any significant trouble. She didn’t know that Xi Rong and Xiao Jie had depended on each other for years now. Killing Xi Rong wouldn’t be hard, but if it lost them their pawn Xiao Jie, the empty throne would be an issue.

Lin Qingyu lifted his eyes to look at Xiao Li, and his gaze darkened.

It was true that Xiao Li would be easiest to control, but he was still mentally incapacitated. The northwest was in chaos right now; if he and the empress dowager put a fool on the throne, they would struggle to keep the hearts of the army and the people.

They at least had to wait for Gu Fuzhou to come back.

“Empress Dowager,” Laifu said, “the late emperor’s consorts have come to pay their respects.”

“I’ll go see them,” the empress dowager replied. “Xiujiao, feed the prince some more fruit.”

The servant woman named Xiujiao peeled another tangerine to feed to Xiao Li. Xiao Li kept his lips closed, seeming uninterested in it. “Prince, let’s eat more,” the servant woman said, trying to persuade him.

Lin Qingyu had always been cold and aloof, except with his family and Gu Fuzhou. But for some reason, the fool of a prince seemed familiar, even though he’d only seen him a few times.

“Let me try,” Lin Qingyu said.

Auntie Xiujiao hesitated for a moment, but she stepped back and gave Lin Qingyu the seat next to Xiao Li.

Lin Qingyu picked up a segment of tangerine. “Your Highness, open your mouth.”

Xiao Li stared at him for a moment, then obediently opened his mouth, letting Lin Qingyu put the tangerine segment in. It made his cheeks

bulge a bit.

“Is it sweet?”

Lin Qingyu had asked the question casually, but unexpectedly, Xiao Li reacted—he smiled.

Xiao Li had an exquisite face. When he smiled, his eyes’ dullness faded, and his pupils were as bright as stars, capable of besotting anyone. The flesh under his eyes had an unusual, enviable plumpness—Gu Fuzhou had described it, saying that it was different from eye bags. He’d said that his original face had the same feature when he smiled, and that it looked good. Neither Lu Wancheng nor Gu Fuzhou had it, unfortunately.

But now, this feature showed up alongside Xiao Li’s smile…and it really *was* pretty.

Xiao Li only smiled for a brief moment. Then his empty expression quickly returned, as if the smile had just been an illusion.

Xiujiao was stunned, and it took her a while to react. Then she hurriedly ran to report, “Empress Dowager! The prince smiled!”

The empress dowager stood, ignoring the consorts present. “Really?”

“Really! I saw it clearly, and so did Imperial Physician Lin.”

The empress dowager was exhilarated. “S-summon the imperial preceptor!”

Chapter 92

XU JUNYUAN WAS SUMMONED to the palace in a rush—he thought something earth-shattering had occurred, but surprisingly, all the ruckus in Ci'an Palace was merely because the prince of Huai had smiled at the beautiful physician who fed him a segment of tangerine.

Xu Junyuan held Xiao Li's eyes wide open with his fingers, looked into them for a long time, then glanced at Lin Qingyu meaningfully.

"Imperial Preceptor, Li-er has expressed almost no emotion, aside from when he cried right after birth. Now that he can smile, does it mean he's recovering his soul?" the empress dowager asked.

Xu Junyuan mused over that. "Not necessarily."

His answer meant that Xiao Li recovering his soul *was* still possible. The empress dowager's eyes reddened, and her voice trembled as she said, "So that means there's still hope for Li-er's condition?"

"Though the prince's soul left his body, a shred of it remains to protect his life. That residual piece of his soul makes it normal for him to laugh and cry. It doesn't mean anything."

The empress dowager didn't give up. "But Li-er never smiled before. Why would he smile now?"

"You said the prince smiled at Imperial Physician Lin?" Xu Junyuan asked Auntie Xiujiao.

She nodded. "Imperial Physician Lin fed him a slice of tangerine, and the prince smiled."

"That's right, then," Xu Junyuan said, smiling. "The prince's eyes still work. He saw a beauty feeding him, and he smiled because he was happy."

"But the prince hasn't smiled when he's seen other beauties," the auntie replied.

"They probably weren't beautiful enough."

“I’m married, Imperial Preceptor,” Lin Qingyu said calmly. “It’s a bit inappropriate for you to call me a beauty so many times.”

Xu Junyuan bowed. “I apologize for my thoughtlessness.”

Hope had been followed by even greater disappointment. The empress dowager stroked Xiao Li’s cheek and said, a bit choked up, “You should smile at Mother, too, Li-er…”

The empress dowager was so sincere, yet Xiao Li didn’t even want to look at her. He lowered his long eyelashes, quietly playing with his fingers.

Even Xu Junyuan was moved by the scene and tried to comfort the empress dowager. “Time passes, and everything is unpredictable. Whether his soul will return to his body is unknown. But, since the prince likes the general’s wife, you can ask him to come to the palace regularly and stay with him. The future is uncertain, and I hope you will relax and take care of your health, Empress Dowager.”

The empress dowager had experienced ups and downs in her life, having lived in the palace for many years now. At this point, only her son and nephew could cause her to lose her composure. She calmed, wiped the tears from her eyes, and said, “Thank you for coming, Imperial Preceptor.” Looking at the sky outside, she added, “The sun will set in less than an hour. Since you’re here, why not stay in the palace and accompany the emperor and me when we go enjoy the lanterns on the tower?”

Xu Junyuan smiled. “I will, then.”

When night fell, Xiao Jie, the empress dowager, and many other members of the imperial family climbed the gate tower. Xiao Jie stood in front, supporting the empress dowager. One glance at Xiao Jie’s unnatural expression and contrived movements gave away whether his posturing as the filial son of a loving mother was earnest. Several older princes and their wives stood behind them, as did Xiao Li, led by Auntie Xiujiao. Lin Qingyu and Xu Junyuan stood at the back. They were the only two people there who weren’t members of the imperial family.

This tower at the palace was the highest place in the capital, and the best vantage point to enjoy the lanterns. From such a height, they could take in the capital’s grandeur completely.

The lanterns suspended from the trees, fireworks, carriages, and crowds of people were the same as those the previous year.

The moon and the lanterns may have been the same, but the company from last year was gone. Even if Lin Qingyu was in the best spot to enjoy the lanterns, whom could he talk to about it?

From a short distance away came Auntie Xiujiao's voice. "See, Your Highness? That lantern looks like a rabbit…"

A few steps from Lin Qingyu, the young man with only a sliver of his soul leaned on the wall, his eyes reflecting the same lights Lin Qingyu's did.

The empress dowager wasn't in the mood to watch the lanterns. After an hour, she said, "I'm tired. Let's take Li-er back to the palace for some rest. But it's rare for everyone to be together. Talk some more with your uncles, Your Majesty."

Xiao Jie agreed.

Lin Qingyu took the opportunity to say that he was leaving as well, and the empress dowager replied, "Very well. We'll have Imperial Physician Lin take us back to Ci'an Palace." As she spoke, she lifted her hand.

Lin Qingyu paused, then stepped forward, and the empress dowager placed her hand on the back of his.

As they were about to leave, Xi Rong suddenly came up, lifted his robes, and knelt. "I, Xi Rong, head eunuch of the Directorate of Ceremonial, have come to apologize to the Empress Dowager and Imperial Physician Lin," he declared.

Everyone's attention turned toward him. Lin Qingyu and the empress dowager looked at each other.

"What are you doing?" the empress dowager asked Xi Rong sternly. "Do you want to spoil the emperor and princes' moods?"

"No, Mother," Xiao Jie interjected nervously. "A-Rong is sincerely asking forgiveness. Please listen to him."

The emperor had spoken, and the empress dowager couldn't embarrass him in front of the rest of the imperial family. "It seems the

emperor knows your misdeed already. Speak, then."

Xi Rong kowtowed. "On the day I erred, Yongliang had been lost, and the situation in the northwest was dire. Nobody in court could lead the northwest army except General Gu, and he was reluctant. Desperate, I advised the emperor and Prime Minister Cui to deliberately anger General Wu so he could ignite General Gu's fighting spirit. General Gu could thus regain the momentum and strength that had defeated Western Xia in the past to save the citizens of Yongliang. For the sake of the northwest and Great Yu, I had to resort to this plan. I am willing to be punished."

Before the empress dowager could say anything, Xiao Jie said, "Mother, though A-Rong made a mistake, he was thinking of the northwest. Western Xia threatened to massacre Yongliang if they didn't see General Gu. He had no other choice…"

An older prince spoke up. "I heard a bit about what happened that day. General Gu was the general the late emperor had personally appointed to protect the country, yet he had the nerve to ignore the situation in the northwest as though it was none of his business. In my opinion, an imperial edict should have been issued; we would have avoided all these complications. In doing this instead, the emperor showed General Gu considerable courtesy."

Another older prince agreed. "Third Brother is right. After all, this was entirely for the sake of Great Yu. Even if the eunuch is guilty, his merits offset his flaws."

Xi Rong glanced at Lin Qingyu. The beautiful imperial physician was looking at him silently, his expression calm…but he knew that Lin Qingyu wanted to take his life.

The empress dowager's chest rose and fell as she tried to hide her anger. "Since two princes have vouched for you," she sneered, "I have no choice but to give you a light sentence. Take him away and beat him thirty times with a board!"

Xiao Jie's eyes widened. "Th-thirty?"

"What?" The empress dowager said coldly. "You think that's too many?"

“Emperor,” Xi Rong said quietly. Xiao Jie pressed his lips together, falling silent, but everyone could see that he couldn’t bear it.

Lin Qingyu couldn’t help wondering what expression Xiao Jie would make if Xi Rong died in front of him.

He wanted to see it.

Back in Ci’an Palace, the empress dowager had Auntie Xiujiao take Xiao Li back to his rooms to rest. Then she dismissed everyone, ranting, “What a trick, for that villain to confess first! I underestimated the eunuch. And I didn’t expect the emperor to be so protective of him!”

“Unfortunately, right now isn’t the time to touch Xi Rong,” Lin Qingyu said.

“Why not?”

“The capital mustn’t not be in disarray until the general retakes the northwest. We’ll need to wait until the general recaptures Yongliang and stabilizes the situation in the northwest before we act.”

Having stayed in the capital, Lin Qingyu had to make sure Western Xia didn’t have any chance to lower the army’s morale so that the soldiers could fight without worry.

“I don’t understand,” the empress dowager said coldly. “How could killing Xi Rong—a slightly cunning eunuch—cause any disruption in the capital? Would the emperor make things difficult because of the rift between the eunuch and I?”

“If I said that Xi Rong is to the emperor as the little prince is to you, would you understand?” Lin Qingyu asked.

The empress dowager was surprised—but of course she understood. Xiao Li was her life. To reunite with her son, she’d been willing to betray the emperor—her husband. And if anyone killed Xiao Li, she would bury the murderer’s entire family with them, then…go to the underworld to stay with her son.

“But…how can that be? Even if they’ve been friends since childhood, that shouldn’t be the case.”

Lin Qingyu told her about Xi Rong’s background, and the empress dowager’s expression turned stern. “If he really is the emperor’s maternal

half brother, then he can't be allowed to stay here," she said firmly.

"The war in the northwest should be prioritized right now," Lin Qingyu repeated. "We can discuss everything after the army takes back Yongliang."

"Aren't you afraid the eunuch will attack us first?"

Lin Qingyu chuckled. "He won't. He wouldn't dare."

If anything happened to Lin Qingyu in the capital, the three hundred thousand troops under Gu Fuzhou's command wouldn't be slaughtering the foe in Western Xia. Xi Rong was waiting for Gu Fuzhou to stabilize the northwest for him; only after that would he look for an opportunity to take back military power. So, given Xi Rong's caution, he wouldn't dare touch Lin Qingyu without solid footing.

Lin Qingyu stayed in the palace until late at night. When he left, the lights were dark and the crowds were gone. Only the scintillating moon shone, and the northwest was thousands of miles away.

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In the northwest, at the governor's manor in Gui Prefecture, Gu Fuzhou reached out his hand to let Hu Ji check his pulse. Then, seeing Hu Ji's solemn face, he heaved a long sigh. "Is my illness incurable?"

"In middle age, balding is common, especially among men," Hu Ji managed to reply. "Your hair loss isn't serious—I've lost more than you. You're worrying too much."

"No, I've definitely lost half my hair," Gu Fuzhou insisted grimly. "Imperial Physician Hu, you have to find a way to cure me. If this continues, I'll go back to Qingyu bald."

Hu Ji could only suggest, "Perhaps it'll improve if you rest more and spend less time thinking deeply."

Gu Fuzhou chuckled bitterly. "How is that possible for me in our current situation?"

As they spoke, footsteps sounded outside. There were two people out there—one was Wu Youyuan, who was with the western expedition's vanguard, and the other was the former Tianji shadow guard Shen Huaishi.

Both men were skilled martial artists—one excelled in hand-to-hand combat, and the other at assassination. After learning that Shen Huaishi had once been a member of the Tianji Guard, Wu Youyuan pestered him often to duel in his spare time. Wu Youyuan didn't even win once a month.

"General, we're back."

Hearing Wu Youyuan's voice, Gu Fuzhou didn't even raise his head. "Congratulations. Was this your tenth loss in a row?"

Wu Youyuan refused to give up. "Shen-dage is older than me. When I've grown up completely, I'll definitely win."

Shen Huaishi smiled helplessly. "General, there's a letter from home for you."

Gu Fuzhou suddenly stood. "Give it to me." In front of the three men, he opened the letter and read it carefully.

"From his expression, Imperial Physician Lin is probably doing well in the capital," Hu Ji noted.

"Everything in the capital is the same. He's trying to solve the problem of our insufficient rations and funding… It's all official business." Turning the page, Gu Fuzhou smiled a bit. "Oh—the little gu creatures are growing well. They've already laid another nest."

"Gu creatures? What are those?" Wu Youyuan asked curiously.

"The second young lady and third young master of my manor," Gu Fuzhou replied seriously.

Wu Youyuan was shocked. "When did you and Imperial Physician Lin have children?"

"I imagine the general is speaking of the poisonous insects Imperial Physician Lin is raising," Hu Ji explained, smiling.

Wu Youyuan burst out laughing, and Shen Huaishi couldn't help but grin.

"What about the eldest son, then?" Wu Youyuan asked.

“Not the eldest son—the eldest daughter,” Gu Fuzhou corrected. “A servant trampled her to death.”

The three men looked at each other, not knowing what expression they should have. “General, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Speaking of family, today’s the Lantern Festival,” Hu Ji noted. “That’s the only day in the capital without a curfew, and the liveliest day of the year.”

Hearing Hu Ji say that, Gu Fuzhou recalled the night of the festival in the capital. Lanterns all over the city, the Jinshui River as bright as a galaxy, an ethereal beauty, and…a rabbit-shaped lantern.

Gu Fuzhou smiled to himself and patted Wu Youyuan. “Let’s do our best, everyone. The sooner we finish the battle, the sooner we can go home.”

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It took Gu Fuzhou and his army more than six months to recover several cities near Yongliang. Then, in the autumn of the second year of Chuxi, Great Yu’s army gathered its strength and prepared to advance, heading for the last city—Yongliang.

Chapter 93

THE SCENERY AT THE northwest border was different from that of the capital. Soon after the start of winter, the winds sliced through the air like knives, and frost flew in the sky. The mountains cradled the setting sun, the sand looked like snow, and the wild geese called as the lonely city remained closed off.

Last winter, Western Xia took Yongliang from Great Yu, killed and humiliated its commander, and threatened to massacre the city. One year later, the scenery at the border remained the same, but the people inside and outside the city had traded positions. Great Yu's army had begun camping outside the city a month earlier, and in that month, they'd been gaining strength for the final battle.

The days spent in wait were boring compared to attacking a city. As time went by, a certain passionate young man couldn't hold himself back any longer.

"General, we've been waiting around for a month." This was the third time in ten days that Wu Youyuan had requested to go to battle. "Before, our army captured several small locations, including the cities of Guangyang and Langu, and Zhuo County, which greatly boosted morale. This would be a good time to attack Yongliang all at once; if we delay any further, the soldiers will slack off, and our food and grain stores will run out."

Gu Fuzhou crossed his arms and looked quietly at the northwest terrain on the sand table.

"You're wrong, General Wu. *The Art of War* states that the best strategy is to attack the enemy's plans, the next best is to attack their alliances, the next after that is to attack their soldiers. The worst is to attack their cities. Attacking the city is our last resort. Yongliang is a crucial stronghold in the northwest, so military strategists have always vied for it. Yongliang is easy to defend—its defenses are solid—but it is difficult to attack. How can you compare it to small cities like Guangyang and Langu?"

said Shi Pei, a senior in the northwest army who held the fourth-rank position of “mighty general.”

Gu Fuzhou glanced at Shi Pei. The man was known to love his soldiers like his own sons; though he’d fought for many years, he was devastated by the casualties of every battle. Reducing casualties was his utmost priority. He would rather fight a messy battle than a perfect one in order to protect his soldiers. Shi Pei was a noble character, and Gu Fuzhou admired him a lot.

“Attacking a city is difficult, but is it going to get any easier?” Wu Youyuan retorted. “We’ll attack eventually, so why not do it now?”

Gu Fuzhou pressed the space between his brows. “Passion is a good thing, Youyuan, but your blood runs too hot. If a mosquito bit you, it would burn its mouth.”

After being in the northwest for a year, Gu Fuzhou had gotten too lazy to maintain his cold, aloof personality—he just acted as he wanted. After a bit of shock, Wu Youyuan and the others slowly accepted his new personality. They heard veterans of the northwestern conflict say that after General Gu was poisoned and almost died, his temperament had changed drastically. Back then, he was almost ridiculous; now he was a bit better; at least he wasn’t sleeping all day long. Fortunately, whatever his personality, he wouldn’t lead them to defeat.

Wu Youyuan was still willing to listen to Gu Fuzhou. He said, “Then please teach me better, General.”

“Have you forgotten how General Zhao lost Yongliang last winter?”

“I haven’t,” Wu Youyuan said quickly. “Last year, he was trapped in Yongliang. Heavy snow blocked the road, so food and grain couldn’t be delivered. When they’d exhausted their stores of weapons and food, General Zhao opened the city gates and fought to the death. He was defeated by Western Xia’s elite troops and perished.”

Gu Fuzhou asked, “Do you still not understand?”

Wu Youyuan’s talent lay entirely in military strategy, so when Gu Fuzhou asked that, he understood immediately. His eyes lit up. “Do you want to do the same thing as last year, General? Deplete their food stores and force them to open the gates to fight?”

Gu Fuzhou nodded. “Losing Guangyang, Langu, Zhuo County, and other areas has cut off Yongliang’s food supply lines. However big the city is, it’s still isolated. We have continuous supplies, whereas Western Xia’s army can only wait until theirs are depleted. If we whittle them down through attrition, it will reduce our casualties by at least half when we attack the city.”

Shi Pei wholeheartedly agreed with Gu Fuzhou. “Giving them a taste of their own medicine is a good idea! Western Xia supplemented the rations that were already in Yongliang with additional ones brought from Guangyang and other cities—but those can only sustain them fifty days at most. Now that a month has passed, if we wait another fortnight, the enemy will either starve to death or open the city to meet us as General Zhao did. By then, their army will be in disarray, and ours will have been resting for two months. There will be no doubt we can take Yongliang!”

Wu Youyuan thought this over and agreed that it was the best strategy. Still, he had some doubts. “Western Xia needs rations, but so do we. The key thing is whether we can outlast them.”

Gu Fuzhou turned to Shen Huaishi. “How much longer can our rations last?”

“Less than ten days,” Shen Huaishi replied. “But Imperial Physician Lin said that a large quantity of food from Jiangnan is already coming north by water at the start of the month. It’ll be transferred to land in Gui Prefecture. I don’t think it’ll take too much longer to be delivered here.”

“That’s definitely enough time!” Shi Pei declared.

“That’s assuming it can be delivered smoothly.” After some thought, Gu Fuzhou directed, “Huaishi, please go to Gui Prefecture to personally oversee the delivery of rations to Yongliang.”

“I’ll leave immediately,” Shen Huaishi said.

Having discussed that, Gu Fuzhou and Wu Youyuan started assessing the number of weapons needed for the siege.

“General, you’ve changed a lot since returning to the northwest,” Shi Pei couldn’t help saying.

“Hmm? How so?”

“When you were in the northwest two years ago, you always had a headache when you came to a meeting. You let General Zhao make the decisions. But now you attend to things meticulously and stay involved in everything.”

“No two ways about it: I’m too desperate to win,” Gu Fuzhou said, laughing softly. “I can’t die.”

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The war in the northwest had hit its final stage. Lin Qingyu hadn’t slept for three days; he’d been helping to arrange the transport of rations from Jiangnan to the northwest, a batch that could sustain the army there for a month. But now that everything was settled, he could finally relax a bit.

Walking out of the Ministry of National Defense, Lin Qingyu realized that it had started snowing. The flurry wasn’t heavy, but it stung his eyes. A moment of confusion later, he took a step back and bumped into the assistant minister of national defense.

The assistant minister of national defense had not yet reached thirty, so he was considered a young talent. He was a distant relative of the empress dowager, so he was naturally on Lin Qingyu’s side. Recently, Lin Qingyu had worked with him on handling the rations.

Seeing Lin Qingyu’s pale face, the assistant minister assumed that he was worried about the war. “General Gu has recovered several cities around Yongliang, and he’s preparing for a siege. It’s only a matter of time before Yongliang is reclaimed,” he said. “You needn’t worry, Imperial Physician Lin. Great Yu will win this battle.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “I hope so.”

The assistant minister smiled gently. “The road is slippery with snow. Why don’t I escort you out of the palace?”

“No need,” was Lin Qingyu’s succinct reply.

The assistant minister was a bit disappointed, but he didn’t let it show. “Then please be careful on your way, Imperial Physician Lin.”

Lin Qingyu had only taken a few steps when someone from Ci’an Palace came to extend the empress dowager’s invitation to the palace for dinner. In the past year, he’d eaten more meals in Ci’an Palace than “filial son” Xiao Jie. That gave rise to abundant gossip, and some even said that the empress dowager had adopted Lin Qingyu as her godson and was treating him with more kindness than she did the emperor.

But Lin Qingyu knew that she was only so nice to him because the mentally handicapped prince of Huai would smile exclusively for him. She often invited Lin Qingyu over just to make Xiao Li smile.

When he arrived, he saw the emperor’s sedan chair outside. “Is the emperor here?” he asked Laifu.

Laifu replied, “Yes—to pay his respects to the empress dowager. He’s playing in the snow with the little prince in the rear courtyard.”

The two brothers were squatting in the snow to build a snowman. To be precise, only Xiao Jie was making a snowman; Xiao Li couldn’t do something so complicated. He could only roll the snow into small balls and place them down carefully. Xiao Jie kept talking to him, but he didn’t react at all.

Auntie Xiujiao was standing nearby. She saw Lin Qingyu and smiled. “Prince, look who’s here.”

Xiao Li lifted his gaze to stare at Lin Qingyu, a little dazed, and smiled instinctively.

That was the first time Xiao Jie had seen Xiao Li smile. He couldn’t stop himself from saying, “Sixth Brother, you’re too pretty…”

Lin Qingyu tried to kneel to Xiao Jie, but the emperor averted his gaze. “Don’t stand on ceremony, Imperial Physician Lin.”

“It’s cold outside, so don’t let the prince play here for too long,” Lin Qingyu instructed. “His cloak is already wet.”

“I’ll take the prince to change his cloak,” Auntie Xiujiao said hurriedly.

She took Xiao Li away, and Xiao Jie studied Lin Qingyu furtively, as if he wanted to look at him but didn’t dare to.

“Your Majesty, do you have something to ask me?” Lin Qingyu inquired.

Xiao Jie shook his head, then nodded, and mustered up the courage to ask, “Imperial Physician Lin, w-will you hurt A-Rong and me?”

Lin Qingyu stared at him and asked expressionlessly, “What did Eunuch Xi say to you, Your Majesty?”

“That you and General Gu aren’t sincere with me, and he wants me to stay away from you.” Xiao Jie scratched his head and added hesitantly, “But I don’t think you’re a bad person.”

Lin Qingyu snorted coldly. “You’ve been with Eunuch Xi so long, Your Majesty, and you don’t believe him?”

Xiao Jie waved hurriedly. “I-it’s not that I don’t believe him. I just don’t believe you’d do that…”

Lin Qingyu interrupted him. “Your Majesty, you’re an adult; can’t you make your own judgments? If I said I wouldn’t harm you and Eunuch Xi, would you lower your guard against me?”

Xiao Jie puffed his cheeks out, seemingly upset. “I put this question to you with good intentions, so why ask that?”

“Well, I’ll tell you that I won’t hurt you—at least, not before the general returns,” Lin Qingyu said casually. “Whether you believe me is up to you.”

Xi Rong and Lin Qingyu had already tacitly agreed upon these terms, so telling them to Xiao Jie was fine. But it seemed that Xi Rong hadn’t told Xiao Jie about their circumstances, or the emperor wouldn’t have worn an expression of such panic and terror. “So, when General Gu is back, will you…will you…”

“You should ask Eunuch Xi what he plans to do to the general when the general returns,” Lin Qingyu replied.

Xiao Jie paused, then murmured, “I’ll go ask him…”

He ran out of the courtyard, going inside to look for Xi Rong. He searched all over the place, crying, “A-Rong! Where’s A-Rong?!”

“Eunuch Xi has left the palace today,” another of the eunuchs told him. “He said he had business he needed to attend to at his manor.”

“Then I’m leaving the palace too,” Xiao Jie said without hesitation. “Prepare things for me.”

Xi Rong hadn’t had a manor originally; he’d just lived wherever Xiao Jie lived. Later, Xiao Jie painstakingly chose a manor for Xi Rong and bestowed it upon him—it had originally been the residence of Xiao Jie’s aunt, Eldest Princess Pingchang. She was the late emperor’s most beloved little sister, so naturally, her manor was extremely opulent. Unfortunately, the princess had died young of an illness, and the manor remained empty until Xiao Jie assigned its new owner after ascending to the throne.

At present, the doors and windows of the Xi manor’s study were closed, and Xi Rong was holding a secret meeting with an unknown visitor. That visitor wore a cape and hood, and he enunciated each word perfectly, an effort that seemed slightly deliberate.

The visitor seemingly hadn’t come with good intentions, so Xi Rong didn’t dare take him lightly. “Are you here to make peaceful overtures, or to seek death?”

“I’m here to make a deal with you on behalf of our military advisor,” the hooded man replied.

“Oh?” Xi Rong stared intently at the man. “What sort of deal would you be discussing with me rather than the court?”

“Gu Fuzhou killed our crown prince, and countless heroes from Western Xia have died under his spear. Western Xia’s citizens want nothing more than to feast on his flesh and drink his blood,” the hooded man said, his voice full of hatred. “The military advisor is willing to give back Yongliang; he asks only that Gu Fuzhou die a terrible death.”

Xi Rong’s eyes were cold. “Yongliang is an isolated city, and it’s already in Great Yu’s palm. Why would we need you to give it back?”

“If you are willing to lend our military advisor some help, Great Yu’s army will lose twenty to thirty thousand soldiers at most in addition to Gu Fuzhou. But if you insist on attacking the city, we will defend it to our deaths—in that case, Great Yu will lose fifty thousand more soldiers. What

do you think of exchanging Gu Fuzhou for twenty thousand soldiers and an intact Yongliang?"

"Gu Fuzhou's talent appears only once a century in Great Yu," Xi Rong said calmly. "Other than him, who could keep the peace in the northwest? His life cannot be exchanged for a city."

"The question is…do *you* hope he returns to the capital alive?" the hooded man said in a low voice.

Xi Rong's tone turned dangerous. "What do you mean?"

"Should Gu Fuzhou die on the battlefield, the legendary beautiful imperial physician will be left without the support of his husband. He will have nothing but his looks," the hooded man said with an unreadable expression. "Our king has always been protective of beauties. And after hearing about the beautiful imperial physician's deeds over the past few years, he's eager to see the beauty who so thoroughly seduced Gu Fuzhou. You can send the imperial physician to the capital of Western Xia for our king to enjoy, Eunuch Xi—wouldn't it be advantageous for both countries to have a marriage alliance?"

Xi Rong sneered. "Even if you've learned some words of the Central Plains language, you shouldn't misuse them. That's not what a 'marriage alliance' is."

The hooded man smiled. "It's enough that you understand what I mean. Once Gu Fuzhou is dead, the score will be settled, and Western Xia will not attack Great Yu again. You know better than I do whether it's worth exchanging Gu Fuzhou's life for peace in the northwest."

"That would be a deal between two sides, so what does your military advisor want from me?" Xi Rong asked.

The hooded man smiled confidently. "What he wants is simple. It's nothing more than…" He dipped his finger in the tea and wrote *the route for rations* on the table.

Xi Rong was quiet for a long time, then said, "I understand."

The other man stood and bowed, imitating a resident of the Central Plains. "I'll wait for good news from you, then."

"Go through the side door. Don't let anyone see you."

“Of course.”

After he left, Xi Rong sat alone in deep thought. Then he suddenly heard a voice from outside. “Your Majesty?”

Xi Rong’s expression changed, and he quickly opened the door. Xiao Jie’s pale face came into view.

Chapter 94

XI RONG HAD BEEN MEETING secretly with an envoy from Western Xia in his manor. The Xi manor was on high alert, but only against outsiders, not the emperor—and certainly not against the younger brother Xi Rong had protected and doted on all his life.

He knew that Xiao Jie had heard everything.

They'd lived together for so many years that the younger man was like his other self. Xi Rong was familiar with Xiao Jie's every expression and action, but he'd never seen this expression on Xiao Jie's face—panicked, shaken, disappointed, and shaky with fear.

Xi Rong felt a sharp pain in his heart, but his voice remained gentle. "Your Majesty."

Xiao Jie was frozen in shock, as if he were looking at a violently cruel, wicked, merciless stranger.

Xi Rong addressed him again. "A-Jie?"

Xiao Jie's eyes were reddening, as if he'd suddenly woken from a dream. "A-A-Rong, y-you're betraying…betraying…"

Before he spoke the words "the country," Xi Rong interrupted. "A-Jie, you've misunderstood."

"I heard it all! Everything!" Xiao Jie burst into tears. "That man wanted to make a deal with you—he wanted you to harm General Gu. And you agreed!"

Xi Rong stepped forward, wanting to hold Xiao Jie in his arms and comfort him like he had when they were little. Xiao Jie's personality was meek; neither his birth mother nor his legal mother had cared for him, and the late emperor hadn't favored him. He'd suffered many wrongs in the palace—a place of cruelty and dark intentions—since he was a child. As an elder brother, it was Xi Rong's duty to cheer his younger brother up, and he had comforted Xiao Jie countless times as he cried.

This time, however, Xiao Jie didn’t throw himself into his brother’s arms as usual. Instead, he stepped backward again and again like a frightened kitten. “G-get away…”

Xi Rong stopped. “A-Jie, I told you that Lin Qingyu and Gu Fuzhou won’t tolerate me being by your side. Once Gu Fuzhou returns to the capital, Lin Qingyu will attack me. Do you understand?”

Xiao Jie choked. “You still can’t collude with the enemy and sell out your country! I’m a little foolish, true, but I’m also a descendant of the Xiao family. General Gu is fighting for Great Yu—you cannot harm him now. I-I’m going to tell the empress dowager and Imperial Physician Lin!”

“Stop right there!” Xi Rong said sternly.

He’d never been so harsh with Xiao Jie before. Xiao Jie was both aggrieved and irate; as he cried, he resembled a pear blossom bathed in rain, entirely pitiful.

Xi Rong reasoned with him. “Western Xia’s envoy came to me wanting to use Gu Fuzhou’s life to stop the war between our countries. If I rejected that, what could I do? Send the messenger back to their military advisor to tell him to stop dreaming, or just kill him? Whatever I did would only make Western Xia more vigilant against us.”

Xiao Jie was confused, but he understood one thing: Xi Rong hadn’t been sincere in agreeing to the deal. “What do you mean…?”

Xi Rong’s face lightened a little. “A-Jie, think about it. Now that I’ve agreed to Western Xia’s deal, won’t they feel they’ve won and take the battle in Yongliang lightly?”

“So you were only pretending to agree? You were deceiving them?”

Seeing that Xiao Jie’s expression as he gazed toward him had returned to normal, Xi Rong breathed a sigh of relief. Smiling, he asked, “Remember the story I told you when we were children, about Huang Gai’s fake surrender? If he can pretend to surrender, we can pretend to make a deal with Western Xia. Don’t worry—I won’t let myself, much less you, be charged with treason.”

“So that’s what it was!” Comforted by Xi Rong’s few sentences, Xiao Jie wiped away tears with the back of his hand. “Why didn’t you tell me

earlier? I misunderstood you.”

Xi Rong grabbed Xiao Jie’s hand and brushed his tears with a sleeve. “It’s good that we talked it out. Come on—don’t just stand there. Come in.”

They entered the study, and Xi Rong ordered someone to bring the emperor water to wash his face. Xi Rong asked Xiao Jie why he’d suddenly left the palace, and Xiao Jie descibed his conversation with Lin Qingyu.

“A-Rong, do we have to fight with Imperial Physician Lin?” Xiao Jie asked innocently. “I don’t want to hurt him or the general. I think things are good now; it’ll be fine if they continue like this.”

Xi Rong patted Xiao Jie’s head. “Let’s talk about this after Gu Fuzhou defeats Western Xia.”

“All right,” Xiao Jie said. Seeing the wet words still on the table, he asked curiously, “What’s that?”

Xi Rong didn’t try to hide it from him. “Gu Fuzhou has been waiting for Western Xia’s rations to run out for over a month; our army is currently in a stalemate with the foe. So Western Xia wants to know our ration route.”

“They want to take our rations?” Xiao Jie asked.

Xi Rong nodded. “Probably.”

“Oh!” Xiao Jie grew excited. “Then we can tell them the wrong route and plant an ambush there to catch them off-guard!”

Xi Rong was a bit surprised. He smiled. “You’ve gotten smarter.”

Xiao Jie laughed, pleased with himself. “You’re the only one in the world who’d praise me for being smart. But we’ve been together for so long that I’ve probably learned some things from you.”

Xi Rong opened a map that showed the area from Gui Prefecture to Yongliang. “Where do you think the best place to ambush them would be, A-Jie?”

Xiao Jie thought hard for a long time, then pointed to a road. “Here! It’s the choice farthest from the real route, and the path between the canyons is narrow. Once the enemy troops enter, they won’t be able to get out!”

Xi Rong hesitated, then smiled. “We’ll do as you say, A-Jie.”

Xiao Jie felt glad that he'd finally helped Great Yu. "By the way, I think that we should tell the empress dowager and Imperial Physician Lin. They're very concerned about the northwest too."

"No need," Xi Rong stopped smiling. "They don't have to know."

Xiao Jie hesitated. "But…"

Xi Rong looked stern. "A-Jie, you have to remember that Lin Qingyu wants me dead. It's not good for him to know too much. He could weaponize anything in order to take my life."

Xiao Jie was confused. Xi Rong kept saying that Lin Qingyu wanted to harm them, but he never felt that the imperial physician would do that. Lin Qingyu was as beautiful as an immortal—could he really be so vicious?

Though Xiao Jie reconciled with Xi Rong in the end, he'd been deeply frightened in the process. Worried that some of that fear would linger, Xi Rong had a famous opera troupe from the capital visit the palace, since Xiao Jie loved watching opera. When he was interested in a performance, he could sit before the stage for an entire day.

The imperial palace's stage was in the Mudan Garden, not far from Ci'an Palace. It had originally been built for the previous empress dowager to watch operas, but now it was a place that disturbed the current empress dowager's peace.

The empress dowager was discussing Jiangnan's taxes with Lin Qingyu when melodious singing came floating from afar.

"Who's listening to opera in Mudan Garden?" the empress dowager asked, displeased.

"The emperor has no harem, and the previous emperor's concubines all live in Jinyang Palace," Lin Qingyu said. "Who else do you think it would be?"

The empress dowager furrowed her brow. "It seems the emperor is in quite a leisurely mood," she said slowly.

"That's a good thing," Lin Qingyu replied. "It's best for someone like the emperor to do nothing. That way, he won't cause everyone else trouble."

“But there’s still a war in the northwest. Even if the emperor doesn’t really involve himself in court affairs, he should at least pretend to, so that the imperial censors won’t comment on his actions.” After some thought, the empress dowager sent someone to invite Xiao Jie over.

Xiao Jie hurried up immediately, not letting the empress dowager wait. When she reprimanded him, he realized what he’d done. Although Lin Qingyu was present, he said humbly, “I understand my mistake. I didn’t consider all that… I’m sorry, Mother. I will never watch opera again.”

The emperor had admitted his mistake so sincerely that the empress dowager didn’t know what to do. “I’m not saying you can’t watch opera. It depends on the timing. When Great Yu quells the war in the northwest, I’ll want to watch opera too.”

Xiao Jie nodded. “I understand. Thank you for this lesson, Mother. When the nation is peaceful, I’ll invite you and Sixth Brother to watch opera with me.”

Xiao Jie seemed younger than he actually was, and as he nodded, he looked obedient. Though the empress dowager had neglected him in the past, she had no ill will toward him; scolding him this much was enough.

It was time for dinner, so she offered, “Qingyu, you can stay and eat too.”

“I had dinner in Ci’an Palace yesterday,” Lin Qingyu replied.

The empress dowager smiled. “Li-er always eats more when you’re here.”

During dinner, Xiao Jie looked as though he wanted to say something but couldn’t. The empress dowager asked whether there was something he wanted to mention, but he vehemently denied it. After dinner, he returned to Qinzheng Hall.

“He’s not hopeless,” the empress dowager said. “If he weren’t the ruler of a nation, he’d be a kindhearted child.”

Lin Qingyu made a noise in agreement.

“If he could distance himself from Xi Rong so he could receive some more guidance, then even if he’s not a wise ruler, he at least won’t be easily controlled.”

Lin Qingyu laughed lightly. “Unfortunately, he can’t distance himself.”

“You sound too certain,” the empress dowager replied. “Even brothers with the same father and mother can turn against each other for the sake of their own selfish interests, to say nothing of brothers who are an emperor and a eunuch. I’ve been in the palace for a long time and have seen everything. The emperor relied on Xi Rong because he was young and unfavored. But if we find him a dignified, refined, kind empress with whom he can trust his feelings, maybe he won’t value Xi Rong so much.” The more she thought about that solution, the more she liked it. “The emperor is of age. Now that the mourning period for the late emperor has passed, it’s a good time to find him an empress.” The empress dowager had thought that Lin Qingyu would agree with her, but he didn’t react. “Qingyu, what do you think?” she asked.

“Please forgive me, Your Majesty, but I’m not interested in using marriage to trap others,” he said.

She was taken aback, and her expression cooled. “Well, then,” she said passively, “we’ll keep observing.”

That night, Xi Rong himself attended Xiao Jie before the emperor went to bed. Before going to sleep, they usually talked about personal matters; it was a habit they’d kept since they were children. Xi Rong asked Xiao Jie which operas he’d watched that day, but when he did, Xiao Jie looked disappointed. “I don’t want to watch operas at the palace anymore.”

“Why not?” Xi Rong asked.

Xiao Jie told him what had happened. “The empress dowager is right. The soldiers in the northwest are fighting bloody battles, and when I can’t help, how can I enjoy such luxury in the palace?”

Xi Rong wasn’t interested in that question. “Did you have dinner with the empress dowager and Lin Qingyu?”

“And Sixth Brother,” Xiao Jie said, as he recalled it. “He’s the same as always—not reacting to anything and only smiling at Imperial Physician Lin…”

Xi Rong interrupted him. “Did you mention the ambush on the rations path to them?”

Xiao Jie paused, his gaze a little guilty. “No.”

No change in Xiao Jie’s expression could get past Xi Rong. “You still really want to tell them?”

“But…in the end, I didn’t say anything. So aren’t you satisfied?” Xiao Jie covered his head with his quilt. “I’m going to sleep,” he said in a muffled voice. “Please leave.”

Xi Rong narrowed his eyes. “This servant will leave.”

When Xi Rong called himself “servant,” Xiao Jie knew he was upset. But he really didn’t know what to do. Why did Xi Rong and Lin Qingyu have to fight to the death? They’d been fine friends before he took the throne.

Xiao Jie fell asleep with many thoughts on his mind. After some time, he was awakened by someone calling out, “Your Majesty.” When he opened his eyes, he saw his personal eunuch, Xiaoxuanzi.

Rushed footsteps neared, and Xiao Jie was immediately awake. “What happened?”

“Your Majesty, there are assassins in the palace,” Xiaoxuanzi said in a panic. “Eunuch Xi, he-he…”

Xiao Jie grabbed Xiaoxuanzi’s shoulders. “What happened?”

“Eunuch Xi was injured, and he lost a lot of blood…he’s in the side hall now…”

Xiao Jie tumbled out of bed and dashed barefoot all the way to the side hall. Imperial guards had already been dispatched and now surrounded the bedroom. Xi Rong had been carried to the bed; there was a terrifying knife wound in his left abdomen, and blood poured out in a stream. The blood loss meant Xi Rong’s face had lost all color, but although he looked pale, but he was still conscious.

Seeing him, Xiao Jie burst into tears. “Where are the imperial physicians? Summon them!”

“Someone’s been sent for them already,” Xiaoxuanzi said. “The imperial physicians should be on their way.”

Xi Rong grabbed Xiao Jie's hand, his breathing shallow. "Your Majesty, this servant is doing fine. Don't worry."

"How could this be…?" Xiao Jie hugged Xi Rong, on the verge of a breakdown. "How could there be an assassin in the palace? Who would want to hurt you?!"

Xi Rong smiled strangely. "Who else could have used such an unscrupulous assassin other than *them*?"

"Wh-who?!" Xiao Jie cried breathlessly.

Xi Rong groaned in pain.

"Eunuch Xi said it must be someone from the Tianji Guard," Xiaoxuanzi said hurriedly.

Xiao Jie, confused, was still crying. "Why?"

"I recall that the Tianji Guard's token is with Imperial Physician Lin," said Xiaoxuanzi.

"Imperial Physician Lin…?"

Xi Rong closed his eyes, tightening his grip. "Do you still want to be close with him? Do you still want to tell him everything?"

Crying harder, Xiao Jie shook his head. "I don't want to! I won't tell the empress dowager or Lin Qingyu anything anymore. I won't say anything! I just want you to be all right… Don't die, A-Rong! I won't let you die!"

Xi Rong's wound looked scary, but he hadn't been fatally injured; indeed, his life wasn't in danger. However, he lost a lot of blood, so he had to rest for a while.

An assassin in the emperor's quarters was a major concern. Wu Zhan didn't dare neglect it in the slightest; he led the imperial guards in searching the palace all night. Still, he couldn't find any clues.

Hearing of this, Lin Qingyu summoned Wu Zhan and the imperial physician who'd treated Xi Rong that night. After asking a few questions, he understood everything.

"You needn't waste time on this anymore," he said. "The assassin won't be caught."

“Huh? Why not?” asked Wu Zhan.

“If the assassin had the ability to enter and exit the palace without leaving any clues, why couldn’t he kill a mere eunuch? This trick is full of holes. It’s only convincing enough to fool the simple, easily distracted emperor.”

Wu Zhan still didn’t understand. “Imperial Physician Lin, you mean…”

“Xi Rong just wanted to keep the emperor’s heart in his grasp, so that he’ll always be on his side,” Lin Qingyu explained.

“So he orchestrated this himself to gain the emperor’s pity,” Wu Zhan hissed. “How determined! He could even bear to do that to himself?”

Lin Qingyu suddenly smiled. “Good question.”

Xi Rong’s move reminded Lin Qingyu of Gu Fuzhou. Before, Gu Fuzhou hadn’t hesitated to dose himself with heavenly arachnid poison to return to the capital from the northwest and be with him. In that instance, Gu Fuzhou too had been ruthless with himself.

So, this time, he would certainly do anything he could to come back.

Chapter 95

AFTER BEING INJURED, Xi Rong convalesced in Xiao Jie's palace; they were almost inseparable. Lin Qingyu heard from Xiaosongzi that Xiao Jie stayed by Xi Rong's bed whenever he had time, even feeding Xi Rong medicine himself. Xiao Jie had always been the spoiled one, and he wasn't good at serving others; he was clumsy when giving Xi Rong medicine, spilling it all over the place. Still, his efforts appeased Xi Rong.

"There's no way they're just an emperor and his eunuch!" Xiaosongzi exclaimed. "Even full brothers aren't as close as they are."

Xi Rong's plan had worked: Xiao Jie couldn't see anyone but him. As soon as morning court finished, Xiao Jie rushed to Xi Rong's bedroom—he wanted to stay with Xi Rong as his dressing was changed.

Sitting in a sedan chair, Xiao Jie complained to Xiaoxuanzi, "What difference does it make whether I come to morning court? I don't understand such things. My mother's behind the curtain anyway, as well as Lin…" Not finishing, Xiao Jie gritted his teeth and said bitterly, "That person who oversees the court meeting. They don't need me, so why do I have to stay in Zichen Hall to listen? I might as well spend more time with A-Rong."

"As Eunuch Xi said, Your Majesty, you're the emperor—the supreme ruler. Only you can sit on the palace's dragon throne. By doing so, you tell all the civil and military officials that Great Yu belongs to the Xiao family."

"Great Yu has always been the Xiao family's," Xiao Jie said. "All the officials know that perfectly well. Why do I need to tell them?"

"I've heard that some people think that half of Great Yu's rulers are surnamed Wen, and half surnamed Lin," Xiaoxuanzai whispered.

Xiao Jie paused. "Wen…and Lin?"

"Wen," of course, referred to Empress Dowager Wen. After she took over the government, Duke Wen had returned to the cabinet, and many of their relatives and in-laws had received important positions. Among them was a man named Li Chan. Xiao Jie somewhat remembered him: He was

elegant and bright, already a fourth-rank assistant minister of national defense at a young age. Li Chan had spoken a lot at morning court that day; he'd said something about asking the Ministry of Revenue for military pay for the northwest. And as for "Lin…"

Xiao Jie was still thinking about that when his sedan chair stopped. He looked over, and his face darkened.

Who would that be other than Lin Qingyu?

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Lin Qingyu and Li Chan met Xiao Jie on the way to the Ministry of National Defense, and they both knelt to greet him.

However stupid Xiao Jie was, he knew how he'd acquired the throne. Before the "assassination attempt" on Xi Rong, he'd been polite to Lin Qingyu, never letting him perform such a formal greeting. He'd even wanted to get close to Lin Qingyu because of the man's beauty. But whenever he saw Lin Qingyu now, all Xiao Jie could think of was Xi Rong on his last breaths, lying in a pool of blood.

To him, Lin Qingyu was the same Lin Qingyu—a man whose cold temperament stood in fascinating contrast to his ethereal, beautiful appearance, a man who made him shudder with fear. Someone with such a beautiful face had almost taken A-Rong's life.

Xiao Jie no longer enjoyed looking at someone who wanted to harm A-Rong. He had to protect A-Rong; he wouldn't let anyone hurt him again.

Lin Qingyu and Li Chan knelt on the ground, waiting for—but never hearing—the "rise" they expected. Lin Qingyu lifted his head to look at Xiao Jie; when their gazes met, Xiao Jie instinctively shrank back, his eyes fearful and alert. Xiao Jie only said "G-get up" after Xiaoxuanzi reminded him.

"You don't look well, Your Majesty," Lin Qingyu said. "Is something on your mind?"

Xiao Jie tried to keep his expression neutral and said timidly, "It isn't your place to ask about my affairs, Imperial Physician Lin. Xiaoxuanzi, let's

return.”

Li Chan was one of Lin Qingyu and the empress dowager’s confidants in the imperial court. Seeing the emperor’s attitude toward Lin Qingyu, he couldn’t help but worry. “Imperial Physician Lin, do you really not want to explain things to the emperor? Even if he doesn’t care about government affairs, he’s still the emperor. It’s better to have him on our side than not.”

“Explaining wouldn’t be any use,” Lin Qingyu replied. “Fools only believe what they want to believe. Moreover, since Xi Rong wants to pin the assassination attempt on the Tianji Guard, he must already be certain that they won’t expose him. If I’m not mistaken, while he was in power, he won many people over using the emperor’s name.”

Some didn’t see the empress dowager who ruled the nation from behind the curtain as truly belonging to the royal line, to say nothing of Lin Qingyu, who was a mere imperial physician. Cui Lian was of that opinion, as were the elder Xiao princes. They were loyal to the Xiao family, and they would rather obey a eunuch than see relatives outside the line monopolize power.

“But don’t you have the Tianji Guard’s token?” Li Chan asked, surprised.

“The Tianji Guard is under the emperor’s control. For generations, they’ve served no one but the man on the throne. Compared to the emperor, my token is nothing.” Lin Qingyu mulled it over. “I wonder why Xi Rong carried out his plan now of all times.”

After some thought, Li Chan suggested, “Could it be because of the northwest? General Gu is trying to reclaim Yongliang, the northern gateway to Great Yu. If he does so, the trouble in the northwest will be half-solved.”

“Now that Xi Rong’s been injured, he must rest. Thus, he’s incapable of taking care of government affairs,” Lin Qingyu replied. “Why would he give up power at such a time?”

“Perhaps he wants us to let our guard down?” Li Chan suddenly realized something, and his expression shifted subtly. “Do you mean that he’s planning something major?”

“This is the calm before the storm,” Lin Qingyu said coldly. “If Xi Rong had any sense left, he wouldn’t bring himself trouble right now by letting Western Xia take advantage of Great Yu.”

“He’s a eunuch, after all,” Li Chan said worriedly. “Since ancient times, how many powerful eunuchs have cared about the nation and people? As long as he can achieve his goals, he’ll do anything.”

Suppressing his surging malice, Lin Qingyu took a deep breath. “At any rate, we aren’t him. Right now, we should focus on the northwest. Where are the rations being delivered from Jiangnan?”

“They should have been delivered to Yongliang already,” Li Chan replied.

Lin Qingyu stayed at the Ministry of National Defense until late into the night. He’d planned to make do with staying at the palace overnight, but he changed his mind at the last minute. The general’s carriage was waiting at the palace gate, so he put away his umbrella and got in.

“Go to the Lin manor first, not the Gu residence,” he told the driver.

When their eldest child came home so late at night without letting them know he would visit ahead of time, his parents thought that something horrible had happened. But Lin Qingyu told them that nothing was wrong—for now.

“For now?” Lin Rushan frowned. “Are you saying that something *might* happen?”

“It’s only a guess,” said Lin Qingyu. “But just in case, I’d like you to take leave from the Department of Imperial Physicians and remove mother and Qinghe from the capital to avoid any ensuing chaos.” Lin Qingyu smiled lightly. “I recall that my grandmother turns seventy next month. You can go to Jin Prefecture and celebrate with her.”

“What about you, then?” his mother asked.

“I’m staying, of course.”

“But…”

“Don’t ask him anything else. Qingyu has his own plans,” Lin Rushan said decisively. “Please pack our things and prepare for our departure.”

Lin Qingyu's mother hesitated, unable to hide her worry. "Qingyu, take good care of yourself."

Lin Qingyu smiled at her, trying to comfort her. "I will."

Lin Rushan didn't have much to say to his eldest son other than "Take the utmost caution."

The next day, Lin Rushan took his wife and youngest son out of the capital under the pretense of visiting relatives. Over the following days, Lin Qingyu attended court to handle government affairs as usual, sometimes also going to see Xiao Li. He also took time to see Xiaosongzi, who wasn't feeling his best—he'd hurt his throat talking too much and had to recover by keeping quiet for a few days.

Great Yu officials had that one day—the fifteenth—off every month; it used to be the day that Gu Fuzhou most looked forward to. On his day off, Lin Qingyu was feeding snake blood to his gu creatures in the apothecary when Yuan Yin walked in.

"Someone brought a letter, Lady," Yuan Yin told him.

Lin Qingyu asked, "Who?"

"I don't know. He left as soon as he put it down. I heard from the servants at the door that it was a man wearing a hood."

Lin Qingyu stared at the blank envelope, feeling a little uneasy. Yuan Yin stood to one side and watched him open it. After one glance at the message, Lin Qingyu's entire body seemed to turn cold.

"Lady…?" Yuan Yin asked cautiously.

Lin Qingyu put his gu creatures back slowly. "Prepare the carriage. I'm going to the palace."

"I'll help you change, Young Master," Hualu said hastily. Visiting the palace required him to change into his official uniform.

"No need," Lin Qingyu said. He simply put on a fox-fur coat and left, telling Yuan Yin, "Find the messenger."

"Yes, madam. After we find him, what should we do?"

Lin Qingyu got in the carriage, not looking back. "Kill him."

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He walked all the way through the palace grounds to Qinzheng Hall, and happened to run into Li Chan, who was on his way out.

“Imperial Physician Lin!” he said anxiously. “I was just about to go find you. Something terrible has happened—the rations sent to Yongliang…”

“—Were stolen,” Lin Qingyu said coldly.

Li Chan was surprised. “You already know? The generals transporting the grain were skilled, fortunately, and they risked their lives to protect two-tenths of it. Still, that’ll only be enough to sustain the northwest army for a few days.”

“Let’s go inside,” Lin Qingyu said. “The emperor will tell us what happened.”

Xiao Jie, Prime Minister Cui Lian, and the Minister of Revenue—the marquess of Nan’an—were all in Qinzheng Hall. Xi Rong was there too. His injury hadn’t yet healed; his face looked sickly, but he was calm and composed.

Lin Qingyu glanced at him, then turned his attention to Xiao Jie. “Why don’t you explain this, Your Majesty?”

Xiao Jie’s already-pale face turned even paler. “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Really? Someone told me that you’ve already ‘negotiated peace’ with Western Xia, and that tens of thousands of rations were the tribute you gave them for peace.”

“I didn’t! I just…” Xiao Jie looked confused.

Xi Rong interrupted him. “Who told you that, Imperial Physician Lin? Beware falling for reports that are meant to sow discord.”

Lin Qingyu found that admonishment ridiculous. “Is there any need for others to sow discord between you and I?”

Xi Rong seemed to have expected this. “I did make a deal with an envoy from Western Xia,” he said calmly. “I pretended to agree to peace

with them just to lure them in and set up an ambush. I still have the letter from the envoy; it, and the soldiers hidden for the ambush, can both be used as evidence."

Xiao Jie nodded quickly. "I can testify too! I agreed with his plan. I thought up this strategy, and I don't know why they didn't fall for it…"

When Lin Qingyu heard Xiao Jie's stuttered explanation, his face was enraged. "If you could think of a narrow path that was easy to ambush, why wouldn't Western Xia's military advisor have thought of it? Why would anyone with a brain use such a route to transport rations? You ruled out an incorrect route, and he obviously looked for clues to the correct route on the opposite side. Western Xia's military advisor defeated Zhao Mingwei and almost took over half of Great Yu's northwest within a year. Even Xu Junyuan called him a 'Ghost Commander.' He knows better than anyone else where rations are stored and which paths they can be transported along. He could even calculate our situation in the capital. Where did you get the confidence to try and trick on him? What possessed you to think that he would believe such a petty deception?"

Xiao Jie felt guilty. He didn't know what to do. "I didn't do this on purpose. I just wanted to help…"

Lin Qingyu sneered. "*You* of all people?"

The marquess of Nan'an's expression changed, and Cui Lian shouted, "How dare you! Lin Qingyu, don't forget your position! You are speaking to the emperor!"

Lin Qingyu didn't even look at Cui Lian, considering it a waste of time. Instead, he asked Xi Rong, "It's one thing if the emperor couldn't tell, but *you* couldn't either?"

Xi Rong's face was inscrutable. "I didn't think Western Xia's military advisor would be so clever."

"You didn't think so? All right," Lin Qingyu said calmly. "Guards."

Two palace guards came in. "Your Majesty. Imperial Physician Lin."

"Take Xi Rong and beat him to death," Lin Qingyu directed.

After a moment's silence, Xiao Jie reacted first. "No! I won't let you harm A-Rong again!" He jumped up and stood in front of Xi Rong. "I-I'm

the emperor! What right do you have to give orders in front of me?!”

“He colluded with the enemy and betrayed the country,” Lin Qingyu said indifferently. “He led the emperor astray.”

Xi Rong covered the wound on his abdomen and coughed softly. “I told you—I have evidence. I neither colluded with Western Xia nor betrayed Great Yu.”

“Imperial Physician Lin, you say Eunuch Xi betrayed the country. Do you have any evidence?” asked Cui Lian.

Lin Qingyu suddenly smiled. “Have you all misunderstood something? I don’t need evidence to kill him.”

A crack finally appeared in Xi Rong’s expression. “You…”

“Even if you truly intended to fake making peace, so what?” Lin Qingyu stared at Xi Rong as though at a stray dog. “I’ll kill you regardless.”

Chapter 96

QINZHENG HALL WAS where the emperor handled government affairs and met civil and military officials. It was named[27] for what an emperor should do: Manage national affairs with diligence, love his people, and focus on his essential duties. Every word spoken in Qinzheng Hall could steer the economy, people's livelihoods, and the rise and fall of Great Yu itself.

Lin Qingyu had once stood in the palace and examined the previous emperor's pulse as an imperial physician. He still stood here as an imperial physician, but the people he faced were the prime minister, the eunuch, and the new emperor.

Everyone else in the hall wore an official uniform, python robe, or dragon robe befitting their position, and they stood in their proper places. But Lin Qingyu had on only a white robe and fox-fur coat; he didn't look like a powerful official at all. He appeared simply to be a beautiful young man from a scholarly family.

But it was this official—who didn't *look* powerful—who did what he wanted in front of the emperor, not holding back. Before the emperor, he'd said that he wanted to take the life of the person the emperor loved and trusted most.

Amid the crowd's astonishment, and their terrified gazes, Lin Qingyu felt a familiar pleasure in his heart. With Gu Fuzhou absent, Lin Qingyu had been holding back from doing evil deeds. He'd dealt with Xiao Jie's annoying stupidity and turned a blind eye to Xi Rong's actions—for the sake of Gu Fuzhou, the northwest, and the overall situation, he'd endured it all.

But he hadn't suffered a wrong this deep since before Jiang-gongzi came to his side. He was already unhappy to be separated from his husband, and on top of that, he'd had to suppress his selfishness and malice. If these people had been on the straight and narrow, he might've been able to endure it. But now…

“Take Xi Rong,” Lin Qingyu repeated.

The two palace guards exchanged looks and saw hesitance in each other’s gaze. They were General Gu’s men and had always been loyal to the Gu family—but the emperor was the emperor. Even if he had no real power, he was still the supreme ruler. Even Imperial Physician Lin had been polite to the emperor before, so why was he completely ignoring proper etiquette today? This was, in a sense, rebellion.

Before the guards could move, Xiao Jie, who still stood in front of Xi Rong, roared, “You dare this?!”

“I dare it,” Lin Qingyu said.

The marquess of Nan’an likewise thought Lin Qingyu had gone too far. “Imperial Physician Lin, no one wanted the rations stolen,” he reminded Lin Qingyu. “Even if the emperor misstepped, it was unintentional. To be so disrespectful to the emperor—aren’t you afraid he’ll punish you?”

Hearing that, Xiao Jie seemed to find confidence. “Y-yes! I’m the emperor! You can’t talk to me like that! And you can’t harm my people! I’ll punish you!” He addressed the guards. “Come, take Lin Qingyu away, and beat—” he squeezed his eyes closed forcefully before spitting out, “beat him to death!”

When he uttered that last sentence, his voice was choked with sobs. He’d never thought of taking Lin Qingyu’s life, nor did he want to kill anyone. But Lin Qingyu wanted A-Rong dead, and A-Rong couldn’t die, so he had to kill Lin Qingyu. He didn’t want this to happen, but he had no other choice. As long as A-Rong was all right, he wouldn’t split hairs over anything else.

Lin Qingyu stared at Xiao Jie quietly. When the emperor shouted that command, the last trace of pity and kindness in Lin Qingyu’s eyes suddenly disappeared.

“Your Majesty,” Li Chan said, kneeling. “Eunuch Xi is suspected of collusion with the enemy, and Imperial Physician Lin wishes to guide you and purify the emperor’s court. He spoke rudely out of desperation…”

Cui Lian sneered, “It’s not a fifth-rank imperial physician’s job to purify the emperor’s court. And we don’t know which official is treacherous yet.”

Xi Rong's eyes were fixed on Lin Qingyu's face. Yes—it was this man's icy expression, coupled with that face, that struck fear in others, chilling them. A thought popped into Xi Rong's mind—Lin Qingyu wanted to kill Xiao Jie. There was no doubt that Lin Qingyu wanted Xi Rong's life, but he probably wouldn't have thought about killing Xiao Jie before today. If Xi Rong died and Xiao Jie lived, Lin Qingyu and the empress dowager would be able to completely control the emperor, and thus the entirety of Great Yu.

If Xiao Jie died, the only one left from the previous emperor's bloodline would be Xiao Li. Neither the civil and military officials nor the soldiers on the front lines would want such a fool as their emperor—so if Lin Qingyu and the empress dowager insisted on supporting Xiao Li, not only would the previous emperor's brothers get ideas, even members of the troops at the northern border might prepare to make a move. Therefore, Lin Qingyu and the empress dowager must have planned for Xiao Jie's survival.

But right now, Lin Qingyu really wanted Xiao Jie to die. That wasn't a reaction Lin Qingyu would normally have had—he was about to lose control. And that was exactly what Xi Rong wanted to see.

Xi Rong's lips curled. Standing behind Xiao Jie, he leaned down to whisper gently, "Are you serious about what you just said, Your Majesty?" as if it was tempting, seductive.

Xiao Jie seemed entranced; he didn't dare meet Lin Qingyu's eyes. He bit his lips, turning them red. "Lin Qingyu disrespected the emperor; he defied me. His crime is unforgivable, and he should be…executed."

Satisfied, Xi Rong whispered a "Good boy." Then he clapped his hands. "Lord Xie?"

"Yes, sir."

Everyone but Lin Qingyu looked in the direction of the voice and saw a serious man stride in. He wore dark combat robes and carried a sword at his waist. It was Xie Min, the leader of the Tianji Guard.

Before Xiao Jie, Xie Min got on one knee. "I greet the emperor."

"Did you hear the emperor's order?" Xi Rong asked.

Xie Min nodded slightly. He stood up and drew his sword with a clang. Then he approached Lin Qingyu, the sword's light reflecting on the plaque in the hall that read *Diligence and Responsibility*.

"No!" Li Chan chased after him; once he was in Xie Min's path, he opened his arms to block it. "Imperial Physician Lin possesses the token of the Tianji Guard, which the late emperor gave him! He is your master!"

Xie Min was expressionless. "The Tianji Guard only serves the emperor."

"Li Chan, are you ignoring the emperor's orders on behalf of Lin Qingyu?" Cui Lian scolded him. "Move aside!"

Li Chan turned to look at Lin Qingyu, only to see him staring at Xie Min's sword, his eyes hidden under his butterfly-like eyelashes. Nobody knew what he was thinking.

Li Chan moved fast. "Go summon the empress dowager!" he shouted at the guards.

"What a joke," said a slippery voice. "How is an outsider qualified to interfere in Xiao family affairs?" Xiao Jie's ninth uncle, the prince of Heng, appeared at the gate of Qinzheng Hall, followed by elite troops he had secretly transferred over from his territory. "Starting now, no one will step out of this hall except on the emperor's orders." The prince of Heng glanced at Lin Qingyu and snorted coldly. "I came late, and the emperor has suffered a shock. My apologies."

Xiao Jie didn't know why the prince of Heng had suddenly appeared. He was frightened; so many soldiers surrounded Qinzheng Hall, and he didn't know any of them.

"It's all right." Xi Rong quietly held the hand in the sleeve of Xiao Jie's dragon robe. "I've arranged everything. Don't be afraid."

Seeing that Lin Qingyu was sinking into an impossible situation, Li Chan knelt again. "Your Majesty!" He prostrated himself to kowtow. "Your Majesty, think of the soldiers in the northwest, and the citizens of Great Yu. As Imperial Physician Lin just said, the Ghost Commander managed to locate Xi Rong to 'negotiate peace,' which shows that he understands the situation in the capital clearly. If there's upheaval in the palace now, we'll be falling into a trap. The Ghost Commander's tricks are such that he'll

certainly take the opportunity to affect our army's morale. The situation in the northwest is uncertain—the capital can't be in chaos itself!"

"What are you talking about?" Xi Rong descended the steps as if he were strolling in a garden. "How could the execution of a fifth-rank imperial physician change anything in the capital?"

"Imperial Physician Lin is General Gu's spouse. If General Gu learned that he died in the palace…"

Xi Rong let out an "Oh," then replied lightly, "Don't worry, minister. The emperor won't let General Gu know before the general retakes Yongliang."

Li Chan broke out in a cold sweat, completely out of ideas. Would Lin Qingyu really die in Qinzheng Hall that day? He didn't dare look up—he couldn't have handled seeing Lin Qingyu's expression just then. Was he afraid?

"So…" Xi Rong's pupils constricted. "What are you waiting for, Lord Xie?"

Li Chan saw Xie Min's grip on his sword tighten, but Lin Qingyu still didn't react. Unable to hold back, he shouted, "Lin Qingyu!"

Finally, Lin Qingyu moved. He slowly lifted his head, looked at the man with the sword in front of him, and asked, "Lord Xie, you just said you only serve the emperor?"

Xie Min paused. "Yes."

"If the emperor behind you isn't the one recognized by the late emperor, nor by the heavens, would you still obey his orders?"

"What do you mean?" Xie Min asked cautiously.

"I used to be like Li Chan, thinking that if nothing changed in the capital, so Western Xia couldn't exploit the situation, then the soldiers in the northwest could be without worries," Lin Qingyu said with a self-deprecating laugh. "Right now, though, everything is clear: Only when troublemakers disappear completely can the capital be truly stable."

"Lin Qingyu is insidious and cunning. Don't give him time to trick others—Xie Min, you must act," Cui Lian urged.

Lin Qingyu sneered. “Why are you in such a hurry, Eunuch Xi? The late emperor gave me the Tianji Guard’s token. Even if that’s not sufficient for Lord Xie to submit to me, it entitles me to the time to finish speaking—doesn’t it, Lord Xie?”

Xie Min hesitated. “What are you saying?”

“Just now, Eunuch Xi clapped a few times, and you appeared. But I won’t be doing likewise,” Lin Qingyu mocked him.

As he spoke, a rough, loud voice came from the door. “Move! Move…! Why are you all crowding the door?”

As the mass of soldiers crowded against the prince of Heng, he turned around and angrily demanded, “Who is it?!”

The newcomer smiled and apologized, “Sorry, Ninth Prince. You brought too many people, so there’s no room. I could only have the imperial guards and Iron Cavalry battalion surround you outside.”

The prince of Heng was so furious that he turned cold, no longer speaking in that slippery tone. “Wu Zhan! Are you planning to rebel, bringing so many soldiers into the palace?!”

“What are *you* planning to do with so many soldiers?” Wu Zhan retorted.

“Protect the emperor, of course.”

Wu Zhan let out a guffaw. “Then *I’m* here protecting the emperor too. But it’s not the illegitimate Chuxi emperor I want to protect. Rather, it’s… the late emperor.”

Xi Rong’s complexion suddenly changed. Lin Qingyu’s calm wasn’t an act. Had he…?

“This emperor is the real dragon emperor—legitimate and appointed by the late emperor. Are you colluding with Lin Qingyu and rebelling?!” The prince of Heng’s voice was confident, but he couldn’t see Xiao Jie and Xi Rong’s reactions.

Xiao Jie knew how he’d gotten onto the throne, and he was panicking. “A-Rong…”

Xi Rong tried to stay calm. “Don’t be afraid. It’s all right.”

Wu Zhan stopped smiling. “Bring him in,” he said seriously.

An imperial guard pushed a gray-haired man into the palace. The man knelt before Lin Qingyu and bowed his head. “Your Majesty. Greetings, everyone.”

His voice wasn’t as deep as an ordinary man’s; it sounded a bit sharp and thin. As soon as he heard the man, Xi Rong guessed his identity.

“Who are you?” Xiao Jie asked. The man raised his head, and Xiao Jie saw his face. “Eunuch Xue?” he asked, surprised.

Xue Ying had been the late emperor’s head eunuch, serving him for many years. When the late emperor was seriously ill, however, Xue Ying had suddenly retired, returning to his hometown. There’d been no news of him since then.

“Don’t be afraid,” Wu Zhan told Xue Ying. “Tell us everything you know. I’ll protect you.”

Xue Ying lowered his head, hiding his expression. “When the late emperor was ill, he wrote a will and gave it to me. He asked me to safeguard it, and to announce it to the world when he passed away.”

Cui Lian grew agitated. “What nonsense. I saw the late emperor’s will with my own eyes, and it established the current emperor as his heir and successor. If you had his will, why didn’t you take it out then? Why wait until today?”

Xue Ying’s gaze was wooden. As if reciting from a book, he said, “Back then, the prince of Ning was regent, and he held great power in the court and nation. He forced the late emperor to write an edict appointing him the crown prince. When the late emperor was clearheaded, he regretted his decision and wrote a second will. After he passed away, the prince of Ning ascended to the throne. If I’d taken the will out then, I would’ve been courting death.”

Li Chan was relieved, and his face regained some color. “Where is the will now?” he asked.

“I hid it behind the plaque in this hall before I escaped the palace.”

Everyone but Xue Ying looked at the plaque. Xie Min raised his hand, then brought his palm down toward it. The plaque shook, releasing a

sealed edict that landed in Xie Min's hand. He looked at it, then said solemnly, "This is the late emperor's handwriting and seal."

Cui Lian turned abruptly to Xi Rong. "How is this possible?!"

"Ha…" Xi Rong laughed grimly. "Did you foresee this, Imperial Physician Lin? You forged a will from the late emperor?"

"Bullshit!" Wu Zhan roared. "Even Lord Xie said that the late emperor personally wrote this will. What do you have to say for yourselves?!"

Xiao Jie's legs gave out beneath him. He nearly collapsed to the ground, but Xi Rong held him steady. "Might the late emperor's so-called will appoint the sixth prince as the heir to the throne?" He laughed as if he'd heard a hilarious joke. "The late emperor was too heroic and intelligent to ever place Great Yu in the hands of a prince who was mentally impaired. Imperial Physician Lin, if you wanted to fake a will, you should at least have faked a believable one, yes?"

Xie Min shook his head. "The will says that the late crown prince, Xiao Cheng, is still the only permissible heir, and that he cannot be deposed."

"The late crown prince's mother, Lady Chen, once attempted to throw the palace into chaos, committing heinous crimes," Li Chan said immediately. "Yet the late emperor simply cast her into the Cold Palace. He didn't involve the late crown prince, so it's clear that he truly placed much hope in Xiao Cheng. He never once expressed any wish to depose the crown prince, so how could that have happened so suddenly? There must be more to the story."

A chill crept into Xi Rong's heart, but he continued to stand tall and straight. He may have been an incomplete man, but he towered over every other man in Qinzheng Hall; he looked down upon everyone. Other than complete bodies, what did these people have? Xie Min was a lackey with a one-track mind, Cui Lian was a corrupt elder who should die soon, and the prince of Heng was an idiot who thought he was hiding his selfish ambitions well.

And Xi Rong—he was the emperor's brother. The emperor's blood ran in his veins. Why shouldn't he look down upon them?

As for Lin Qingyu… *Ha! Lin Qingyu.*

Xiao Jie grabbed him. “A-Rong!” he cried. “A-Rong, why aren’t you saying anything…?”

Xi Rong threw off Xiao Jie’s hand. The taste of blood filled his mouth as he pointed at Lin Qingyu. “Prince of Heng, Xie Min, what are you still standing there for? Do you believe his words? When the late emperor was deathly ill, the empress and Lin Qingyu spent far more time by his side than His Majesty ever did. So tell me, who forced the late emperor to write that will? Can’t you guess?!”

“Oh—you want to try us? Shut up, then.” Wu Zhan rubbed his hands together, champing at the bit. “Where’s your army from again, Ninth Prince? Can they take a beating?”

The prince of Heng looked back. An endless crowd of cavalry and foot soldiers completely surrounded them. Their men outnumbered his three to one, and they were already prepared for battle.

He had no chance of winning. At this point, the truth was no longer important. The most important thing was saving his own life.

The prince of Heng cleared his throat. “I’m the late emperor’s brother. Naturally, I must respect his will above all else.”

“Huh? We’re not fighting anymore? I got excited for nothing,” Wu Zhan said regretfully.

Had Xi Rong lost…?

Fear ripped through his chest, and he suddenly looked a bit disoriented, as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing or hearing.

Which part of the plan had gone wrong? Was it because of the Tianji Guard, the prince of Heng, Cui Lian, Xiao Jie, Gu Fuzhou, the empress, or…Lin Qingyu?

It was Lin Qingyu.

So that was it. So that was all. Everything he had received was simply charity bestowed upon him by Lin Qingyu, who pitied him. And this little bit of charity wasn’t even thanks to him—it was thanks to the northwest, thanks to Gu Fuzhou.

How did Lin Qingyu view him? The imperial physician had clearly anticipated that this would happen long ago. He had kept his last move hidden and calmly watched as Xi Rong plotted and schemed, stopping at nothing to get what he wanted.

Perhaps Lin Qingyu had found that funny. However Xi Rong struggled, it would only take one sentence from Lin Qingyu to remind him that he would always be a mere eunuch. He would never be entitled to stand in Qinzheng Hall like the rest of them.

Xi Rong had worked diligently on government affairs, focusing intently on his responsibilities. He'd succeeded in his role. Whether before or after Xiao Jie ascended the throne, he had done it all.

He'd gathered provisions for the army in the northwest, severely punished corrupt officials in Jiangnan, and spearheaded the new tax laws. He was loyal to the emperor and imperial court, distributing awards and fines to others… He'd only used the war in the northwest to get rid of Gu Fuzhou because he had no other choice. And in the grand scheme of things, if there was no peace, what was the northwest worth? And what was Gu Fuzhou worth?

What was wrong with what he'd done?

He *hadn't* done anything wrong. Still, he couldn't stay here. Why? *Why?* What did Lin Qingyu have that he didn't?

He didn't understand. He couldn't understand.

Still, he'd lost. He had led Xiao Jie to their defeat.

Slowly, Xi Rong's gaze unfocused and became vacant. His arm dropped to his side, and his expression went deathly still.

Xiao Jie grabbed his arm. "A-Rong! A-Rong! Say something…" he choked out.

Xi Rong closed his eyes. "We lost, A-Jie," he said quietly. "I'm sorry." He had protected Xiao Jie for twenty years as Xiao Jie went from a prince no one cared about to the noblest man of the empire. But he couldn't protect him anymore.

"Then will we die?" Xiao Jie sobbed. "Will you die, A-Rong? I don't…"

He rushed to Lin Qingyu, wanting to grab his clothes. When he met Lin Qingyu's eyes, though, he didn't dare reach out.

"Imperial Physician Lin, don't kill A-Rong, please. I beg you… don't…"

"You're begging me?" Lin Qingyu said slowly.

Xiao Jie nodded rapidly. "I'm begging you! I beg you…"

"Have you ever considered one thing, Your Majesty? If this batch of rations couldn't be delivered, it would delay our army, and Western Xia would defeat us." Lin Qingyu's voice trembled. "Do you think Western Xia would spare our soldiers' lives?"

Xiao Jie froze.

"Rations…" Wu Zhan sighed. "Without them, not even the greatest army in the world can fight."

"I won't kill him now," Lin Qingyu told Xiao Jie slowly and clearly. "I'll spare his life until the army returns from the northwest with victory in their hands. Then I'll sacrifice him to the heavens and cut off his head."

Xiao Jie's eyes widened as the image of Xi Rong lying in a pool of blood flashed before them. "No! No!"

Lin Qingyu walked to Xi Rong. In a voice only they could hear, he said, "I once gave you a choice. I also told you once that if you two refused to obey me, I'd find someone to replace you. I wasn't joking."

Xi Rong looked straight ahead. "If I didn't make a move, we'd have died when Gu Fuzhou returned anyway. I regret nothing," he replied, scoffing quietly; clearly, he didn't believe Lin Qingyu's words. Then he looked one last time at Xiao Jie—at the tears streaming down his face. "Spare his life. He doesn't understand any of this."

Lin Qingyu didn't say anything further. He lifted his hand, and two soldiers stepped forward and took Xi Rong away.

The distraught Xiao Jie chased after him with no regard for his own life. "A-Rong!"

Wu Zhan blocked his way, asking Lin Qingyu, "Imperial Physician Lin, what should we do with His M…with him?"

“His Majesty is tired,” said Lin Qingyu. “Help him back to his chambers.”

Xie Min frowned. “While the late emperor’s will preserved the late crown prince’s right to the throne, the late crown prince himself has long been in heaven.”

“Lord Xie is correct,” the prince of Heng said, as if intending to be fair and just. “But no one from the late emperor’s bloodline can inherit the throne, and we certainly can’t let treasonous Xiao Jie continue to rule. According to Great Yu’s laws, we can only choose an heir from a side branch of the family.”

“Have you forgotten the prince of Huai, Ninth Prince?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“What a joke! The prince of Huai is no brighter than a three-year-old child. How could he rule an empire?”

“He at least won’t come up with any ideas of his own. Besides, there’s still hope that he may recover,” Lin Qingyu said, then changed the topic. “The priority right now is the northwest. What happened today mustn’t leave this room. Everyone here is a top-ranking official, so you should know better than me the benefits and losses entailed by this turn of events.”

After that day, Emperor Chuxi no longer attended court due to illness. The blue signatures of the inner court were substituted for the red signatures of the emperor, effectively allowing the inner court to rule. Moreover, Prime Minister Cui Lian submitted an appeal to resign from his position. Once the emperor granted it, Cui Lian and his family left the capital. The first-rank[28] prince of Heng was also sent back to his territory. He couldn’t reenter the capital unless summoned.

Lin Qingyu and Li Chan had exerted all their efforts to gather what was left of the rations delivered from Jiangnan. The rations could initially have sustained the army for a long time, but only a fifth of the original amount remained. Li Chan had already issued a demand for additional emergency rations from the north, but a snowstorm blocked the path they’d be conveyed along, so a weeklong journey along that route became twice as long. Thus, the emergency rations might not even arrive in time.

Deposing the opposition should've given him time to relax, but Lin Qingyu was plagued by an indescribable fear that gripped his chest. He had nightmares almost every night.

In his dreams, he returned to the marquess of Nan'an's manor and stood holding a bloodred umbrella in the courtyard of Lanfeng Pavilion, endless snow beneath his feet. He saw the familiar wheelchair, saw the red-robed Lu Wancheng sitting in it with his head down, silent and unmoving.

Lin Qingyu's feet were bare as he dragged the skirts of his wedding robes along, walking to Lu Wancheng step by step, using the umbrella to block the falling snow.

At that moment, Lu Wancheng suddenly turned into Gu Fuzhou. Lin Qingyu extended an arm out desperately, his umbrella falling to the ground, but he couldn't reach the person in front of him.

Waking, Lin Qingyu sat up in shock. Huantong, who'd been keeping guard, hurried over with a light. "Young Master?"

Lin Qingyu sat in a daze. He raised his hand to his eyes; they were wet. "Is it…snowing outside?"

"Yes. It's been snowing almost the whole night." Huantong peered at him worriedly. "Young Master, are you all right?"

Lin Qingyu slowly lowered his eyes. "I'm fine."

It had already been half a month since he'd last received a letter from Gu Fuzhou. They hadn't seen each other for a year. All their emotions were left to the lonely shadows of the night, and they could only meet in their dreams.

Only…Lin Qingyu didn't dare dream anymore.

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After the last month of the year had passed, wind and snow blew even harder in the northwest than in the capital. The army's rations depleted even more quickly; the meager one-fifth of their original supplementary

rations, which Shen Huaishi had risked his life to protect, barely counted for anything.

To keep the troops in line, Gu Fuzhou hid the fact that their rations had been stolen. Besides himself and Shen Huaishi, only Wu Youyuan and Shi Pei were aware of the food shortage. On the day the rations had been stolen, Shen Huaishi had escaped from a horde of enemies with a fifth of the rations in tow. He'd been heavily injured when he returned. After Hu Ji miraculously saved his life, Gu Fuzhou wanted to send Shen Huaishi someplace safe to recover, but Shen Huaishi rejected this harshly.

"Imperial Physician Lin told me to follow and protect you, General."

Gu Fuzhou laughed. "Why do you obey my wife so readily? Do you *like* him?"

"No, not at all! Not like that!" Shen Huaishi said hastily. "You're the pillar of the army, General; I've long admired you. So even if Imperial Physician Lin hadn't asked me to, I'd still be willing to give my all to help you."

Seeing that Shen Huaishi had nearly leaped out of bed to prove his innocence, Gu Fuzhou pressed him back onto the bed. "Relax, I was joking. Even if you did like him, I wouldn't mind. Plenty of people like him. But he…" *He only likes me.*

Letting out a soft laugh, Gu Fuzhou continued, "I appreciate your concern, but how about you go somewhere safe to recover for now? You can always come back afterward."

Shen Huaishi shook his head. "I want to stay and recover in the northwest."

"What's so great about this place? The wind is as sharp as a blade. It can age you a decade in a day."

Shen Huaishi was silent for a long time. "I've been many places, floating around like a speck of dust, as if my life were worthless. Only in the northwest do I feel as though I'm truly alive. When I saw all my brethren die in battle, and innocent civilians die in the crossfire, I realized that all of my past—Jingchun, Xiao Cheng, everyone—had been but a temporary illusion. A beautiful dream."

This sudden confession made Gu Fuzhou raise his eyebrows. Shen Huaishi had lived in the northwest for a year, yet he'd never mentioned his past, and Gu Fuzhou had never asked. What was most surprising was that Shen Huaishi could say Xiao Cheng's name so calmly. If Gu Fuzhou's beautiful wife were present, even he might've been shocked.

"Since you mention Xiao Cheng, I have a question I really want to ask you."

"Please go ahead, General."

"Did you use the Departure Pill that my wife gave you?"

Shen Huaishi just smiled.

Gu Fuzhou didn't press him. He only exclaimed, "What's done is done, and we must look to the future. If you want to stay, then stay. I'll summon Youyuan and Shi Pei, and we can decide what to do next."

He patted Shen Huaishi's shoulder, pushed aside the tent flap, and walked into the storm.

Shen Huaishi lowered his head to look at his shoulder.

He felt very comfortable talking to Gu Fuzhou. The general had an almost magical ability to pull someone back from the abyss with just a smile—as he had on the day when Shen Huaishi returned on the brink of death. When Wu Youyuan and Shi Pei learned that their rations had been stolen, one had been enraged beyond reason, swearing that he would barge into the enemy camp alone to reclaim their food. The other, meanwhile, lost all hope.

After a long silence, Gu Fuzhou only said in his usual lazy tone, "That's enough. What's happened has happened, so what use is being angry? That'll only make us lose our minds. Don't look so unhappy, now. How about this? I'll play the xiqin for you, and we'll talk about serious things once you all calm down."

In the entire world, perhaps only someone like Gu Fuzhou could understand Imperial Physician Lin and stay by his side for life.

Chapter 97

THE RATION SHORTAGE hadn’t been announced, but the soldiers certainly began to have suspicions when they saw smaller buns, porridge instead of rice, and that the firewood they burned at night was scarce. The experienced soldiers who had been stationed in the northwest since last year had already been through a food shortage, and they in particular vividly remembered the horrible experience of fighting a war on an empty stomach.

Even if they weren’t afraid of death, they didn’t want to die so pathetically. At least, they didn’t want to die at the hands of their once-defeated enemies because they were weak from hunger.

Shi Pei had the best relationship with the lower-rank soldiers. When they asked him whether there was another ration shortage, he could only give the excuse that he’d prepared: “Don’t worry, everyone. We always have enough to go around. But the days are growing colder, and the great general is worried that snow will block the road like last year and keep food from being delivered. That’s why he’s preparing ahead of time and rationing carefully.”

This excuse worked temporarily, but the more the soldiers heard it, the more they complained.

“Since we have enough food, why don’t you give us more? Our two meals a day are so thin and unsatisfying that we’re not even full enough to practice!”

“It’s damned cold at night too. After I finish my guard shift, my face is frozen solid.”

“And we humans don’t even eat that much. If this continues, the horses will starve too.”

As he watched the army’s loyalty waver, Wu Youyuan grew agitated. “If this stalemate drags on, we’ll ruin ourselves! In the past, warriors carried only three days’ worth of food with them. If they ran out, they fought. If they won, they looted, and if they lost, that was better than

starving to death. Our rations could last much longer than three days. Why can't *we* fight?!"

A small firepan burned in the tent, radiating only a small ring of warmth. Gu Fuzhou sat by the fire for a long time. It warmed his hands, but the armor on his body was still ice-cold. He stared into the flames, his cheek propped up in his hand, listening to Wu Youyuan and Shi Pei continue to debate the topic that had been raised repeatedly over the past couple of days.

Shi Pei shook his head, not daring to agree. "Young General Wu, that was in the past. You said it yourself: Yongliang is a large city. If we attack, we'll need at least ten times the number of soldiers as the enemy."

"But has it occurred to you, General Shi, that Western Xia will be in much worse condition, since we've been prolonging the war? During these last few months, our army has worked hard to build infrastructure so that we're ready to surround the city and face them head-on. We're ready for anything! But if we keep dragging on, the days will only grow colder. If the snow blocks the road again like last year, won't our army also be cut off?"

"But right now, even if we took Yongliang, many soldiers would still be killed or injured…"

"Do you expect to win a battle without death?" Heated with emotion, Wu Youyuan forgot all decorum. "You're too afraid of death, General Shi."

"Youyuan," Gu Fuzhou said, "mind your words."

Wu Youyuan flinched in shock, finally remembering that Gu Fuzhou was sitting right behind him. "You were listening, Great General?"

Gu Fuzhou raised his eyes. "What else would I do?"

"You were so silent. I assumed you were thinking."

"That doesn't prevent me from listening to you two. A general must be able to do two things at once." Gu Fuzhou added wood to the fire. "You went overboard just now. Apologize to General Shi."

Wu Youyuan was about to apologize when Shi Pei let out a bitter laugh. "I am afraid of death. But I also fear my brethren dying. General or mess officer, they all have families; they're all living souls…"

Wu Youyuan immediately forgot about the apology. “But if they don’t die now, more will die later!” he retorted.

Neither Wu Youyuan nor Shi Pei held grudges; they were brothers in life and death. They fought often but made up quickly. As long as neither man got too heated, Gu Fuzhou was too lazy to care.

They were now arguing so intensely that they didn’t even realize that Gu Fuzhou had left. It was mealtime, and an endless line of soldiers stood in front of the mess tent. Gu Fuzhou stopped behind another tent, secretly observing. Each soldier was served only one bowl of watery porridge and a bun about the size of Lin Qingyu’s fist. That wasn’t even enough food during the summer, much less in this freezing weather.

A tall, muscular man took his bun. He didn’t devour it as his peers did, however. Instead, he tucked it into his armor. Gu Fuzhou found that odd, so he tailed the man through rows of tents to the stables.

“Xiaolinzi!” the man called.

A young man feeding the horses turned. A smile graced his fresh face. “Jiang-dage!”

The tall man stuffed the hidden bun into the young man’s hands. “Hurry, eat this while it’s still hot.”

The young man glared at him. “It’s only one bun per person. If I eat it, what will you eat? Quick, take it back.”

The tall man refused vehemently. “I’m not hungry, so why would I eat it? I already told you, I’m from the same town as General Shi, so he’s taking special care of me. I just ate the two meat pies he gave me, so I’m really full.”

“Liar. I can hear your stomach growling…”

Gu Fuzhou was enjoying watching the pair when someone suddenly said from behind, “General.”

The only person who could sneak up on him like that was Shen Huaishi. Although Shen Huaishi’s injuries hadn’t fully healed yet, he couldn’t bear to keep resting; he insisted on getting out of bed and doing whatever he could.

Gu Fuzhou didn’t disturb Xiaolinzi and Jiang-dage; he left quietly with Shen Huaishi. “What’s happening, Xiao-Shen?”

Shen Huaishi blinked, stunned by the nickname for a moment. “We have reconnaissance reports that snow has completely blocked the road from Guangyang to Yongliang. The ration cart can’t go down it, so the food can only be hauled in on our shoulders.”

Gu Fuzhou glanced back at the two people in the stable. He laughed quietly and said in a helpless tone, “We’re in a bad position… But I don’t think I have any other ideas.”

The great general was smiling, but Shen Huaishi’s chest ached for some reason. “General?”

“Let’s go,” Gu Fuzhou said. “We’ll see whether Wu Youyuan and Shi Pei are finished arguing in there.”

Inside, as Gu Fuzhou had guessed, the pair hadn’t finished arguing. Gu Fuzhou picked up the xiqin that he’d brought from the capital and casually drew the bow across the strings. The instrument let out a piercing screech, and the pair finally quieted, looking toward him.

“Make sure our men eat their fill for two days,” Gu Fuzhou directed, his tone the same as usual. “After that, we’ll attack the city.”

Wu Youyuan and Shi Pei’s faces had very different expressions.

Wu Youyuan was ecstatic. After a hasty “I’ll go prepare now,” he left.

Shi Pei hesitated, looking as though he had something to say.

Gu Fuzhou could guess his thoughts. “Wu Youyuan is correct,” the great general explained. “We must attack sooner or later. If we drag it on, there will only be more deaths and injuries.”

“Since you’ve already made up your mind, I will obey your orders,” Shi Pei said in a low voice.

“Don’t worry so much,” Gu Fuzhou said reassuringly. “I have a plan that may minimize our losses when we retake Yongliang.”

Shi Pei’s eyes lit up. “What genius idea do you have, General?”

“It’s not genius, but you’d recognize it if the time for it came.” Gu Fuzhou didn’t elaborate further. “I just hope I won’t have to use it.”

That day, the snow finally stopped falling. In the cold, bright moonlight, nothing seemed different about the camp, although it was a bit quieter than usual.

Gu Fuzhou lay on his bed in the dim firelight. For the hundred-and-eighth time, he reread the letters Lin Qingyu had written him. In those letters, Lin Qingyu mostly wrote about the situation in the capital. He also occasionally replied to flirty sentences Gu Fuzhou had written.

Gu Fuzhou had asked Lin Qingyu: *Do you know the longing etched into delicate dice, embedded as deep as red beans into my bones?*

Lin Qingyu replied, *It's 'Do you know the longing etched into my bones, as deep as red beans embedded into delicate dice?'*[29] *Everything is calm enough in the capital, although Xiao Jie is so dumb that it annoys me.*

Gu Fuzhou wrote back: *Then replace him. Wait, Physician Lin—I've awaited your reply for a month, and all you did was correct my grammar? At least tell me outright that you miss me.*

Lin Qingyu replied, *We need to take back Yongliang first; I don't want to replace those two just yet. I miss you very much.*

Gu Fuzhou began to act naughty: *Where do you miss me? What do you want to do with me? Say more, Physician Lin. I'd like to hear it.*

Lin Qingyu responded, *The control I exert rankles Xi Rong. He's tested me multiple times. I am out of patience.*

Upset, the general replied, *Why do you need to be patient? Just do what you want. I left you so many men back home—they're not there to watch you be bullied. And, darling, you didn't respond to my flirting in the last letter. If you don't reply this time, I'll throw a tantrum.*

Lin Qingyu wrote, *I want to have sex with you. Satisfied? Naturally, I'm only being patient for the sake of you and the northwest. But Xi Rong has already secretly allied himself with the prime minister and the prince of Heng. The Tianji Guard is also within his control. But I don't think those two will last long enough for me to make a move. They're absolute idiots.*

Looking at Lin Qingyu's neat, graceful handwriting, Gu Fuzhou could practically see the great beauty—enraged beyond words but forced to remain calm. Without Gu Fuzhou, Lin Qingyu didn't have anyone to

placate him; he'd be pitiful and helpless. And, in that state, he'd go do something wicked and render the people who'd wronged him even more pitiful and helpless than he was.

And Gu Fuzhou couldn't be there to see it! *Fuck. This is so unfair.* If their relationship remained long-distance, he would even forget their first kiss.

"Great General!" Wu Youyuan's voice once again reached him before his body did. "I invented a new battle formation. No one has ever used it, and no one in the future could think it up. Not even the Western Xia's army tactician will be able to overcome it!"

Gu Fuzhou stuffed his letters beneath his pillow. "That's impressive," he praised Wu Youyuan perfunctorily. "You're just in time—come view the moon with me."

Wu Youyuan couldn't understand the invitation. "You feel like viewing the moon at a time like this, General? Before an important battle, it's better to study formations."

"You're too tense, Youyuan," Gu Fuzhou said with a smile. "But there's no difference between moon-viewing in the capital and in the northwest before an important battle." He walked out of the tent, sat down, and patted the empty place beside him. "Come sit here and view the moon with me. We can look at your formation afterward." Wu Youyuan was about to refuse when Gu Fuzhou added, "That was an order."

Wu Youyuan sat down unwillingly beside Gu Fuzhou, who asked, "How does the northwestern moon compare with the capital's?"

Wu Youyuan looked up. "Isn't it the same?"

Gu Fuzhou shook his head with an amused sigh. "Unromantic man." He watched the moon in silence for a while, then suddenly said, "Youyuan, if I'm unfortunately captured…"

"Don't say that, General!" Wu Youyuan interrupted quickly. "Your plans are flawless, and our men will certainly win!"

"Don't get upset," Gu Fuzhou laughed. "I mean *if*…"

"There is no if," Wu Youyuan said, determined.

Back when Zhao Mingwei lost Yongliang and was captured by the enemy, he had immediately swung his sword at his own neck. As a general, he'd preferred to die, rather than be humiliated. Wu Youyuan guessed that Great General Gu must be thinking the same thing. If he fell into enemy hands, he wouldn't give them the chance to humiliate him.

"I just wanted to tell you," Gu Fuzhou said slowly, "that if I'm unfortunately captured…you guys have to come save me."

Wu Youyuan froze. "Huh?"

"I promised Imperial Physician Lin that I wouldn't die. I even wrote him a pledge. So I can't die." Gu Fuzhou stretched out a hand. Looking at the clear moonlight pooling in his palm, he smiled. "So whatever happens, you must do everything to save me—please."

Chapter 98

WHEN WU YOUYUAN HEARD Gu Fuzhou's speech, his heart felt heavy. The great general mentioned his wife, the gorgeous imperial physician. Wu Youyuan had met Imperial Physician Lin before and found him as beautiful as an immortal from a novella. At the moment, Wu Youyuan was excited for the upcoming battle—Imperial Physician Lin, on the other hand, must be worrying about his husband.

And the other men's family members were surely doing the same.

Shi Pei was afraid of death because he was afraid that his brethren would die, but Great General Gu didn't want to die because he'd written a pledge to his wife.

Wu Youyuan thought about his own family. When he left the capital, his mother had packed his bags with red-rimmed eyes, and his elderly grandfather personally escorted him out of the city. At the moment of Wu Youyuan's departure, the old man hadn't said anything, but he'd patted his grandson's shoulder with a trembling hand.

"I can't die, either!" Wu Youyuan yelled, leaping to his feet. "None of us can!"

Gu Fuzhou was stunned, then amused. "Why are you so fired up all of a sudden?"

"General Shi is right. Whether a general or a mess cook, who doesn't have parents? The fewer people who die, the better."

Gu Fuzhou nodded approvingly. "Not bad. You've grown. We didn't view the moon in vain."

Full of fire and determination, Wu Youyuan clenched his fists. "This is no time to be viewing the moon, General. Help me look at the formation. It might enable us to hold our own against an army ten times our size and greatly decrease the number of injured men."

Gu Fuzhou grabbed Wu Youyuan's arm to help himself stand. "I'm a bit hungry. Go to the mess tent and bring back two bowls of plain noodles.

We can eat while we look over the formation."

"Yes, sir! I'll go now!"

During a food shortage, even plain noodles in clear soup were a delicacy. Recently, Gu Fuzhou had been eating cold buns with the rest of the soldiers; even the little gu creatures at home were probably eating better than he was.

Gu Fuzhou was anticipating the joy the noodles would bring him. When Wu Youyuan returned, however, he was empty-handed, and his expression was angry. Oddly, however, he also seemed a bit…embarrassed?

Gu Fuzhou drank some water. "What happened?"

"When I went to the mess tent, it was completely dark inside, and I saw two soldiers d-doing…doing…" Wu Youyuan gritted his teeth. "Doing what cut-sleeves do!"

Gu Fuzhou nearly spat out his water. "Well, look at that," he exclaimed in envy and admiration.

His last time doing what cut-sleeves did felt like a decade ago. He'd nearly forgotten what it was like to hold a beauty in his arms.

"The army camp is a place of serious business," Wu Youyuan declared. "If those two are so bold as to engage in such lechery here, they must be severely punished!"

"Is there a rule against cut-sleeve activities in the army?" Gu Fuzhou asked.

"Yes!"

"If they happen, what should be done?"

"The participants should be executed!"

"I see," Gu Fuzhou said. "Where are those two now? Bring them to me."

Soon, the daring couple was brought to Gu Fuzhou, their arms bound behind them with rope. Gu Fuzhou thought that they looked a bit familiar. On closer inspection, he saw that they were the bun-sharing couple from earlier that day, Jiang-dage and Xiaolinzi. Having been brought before Great General Gu, both lowered their heads, not even begging forgiveness.

Noticing that their clothes were neat, Gu Fuzhou beckoned Wu Youyuan over. “Didn’t you say they’d engaged in cut-sleeve activities?” he asked quietly.

“Yes. I saw it myself.”

“What did they do?”

“The taller one kissed the shorter one’s forehead.”

Gu Fuzhou was speechless.

“Great General,” Jiang-dage said roughly. “I forced Xiaolinzi to do this. If you must hand down punishment, please cut off my head alone.”

Xiaolinzi was so frightened that he shook, but at that moment, he suddenly found the courage to speak: “No—it wasn’t like that. Jiang-dage didn’t force me. I was a willing participant.”

Gu Fuzhou glanced at Wu Youyuan, his gaze quite interested. “What do you think should be done?”

“They should be punished according to the law, of course!”

Jiang-dage’s expression didn’t change. “If the general wants my life, I have no words to say in response. However, I’m assigned to the first platoon for our attack in two days. I wish to die then, not now. Please fulfill my wish, Great General!”

Gu Fuzhou and Wu Youyuan exchanged glances. During an attack on a city, hardly anyone on the front lines survived. And whenever they retook a city, someone had to climb its walls first.

Xiaolinzi seemed to have known about this already. He didn’t seem surprised—he only let out an uncontrollable sob.

Jiang-dage knew that he would die soon. To avoid regrets, he’d even broken the rules and confessed his feelings to his lover. But he’d only kissed Xiaolinzi’s forehead when Wu Youyuan caught them by chance. It reminded Gu Fuzhou of his own school days, and the teachers who scoured the track field with a flashlight at night, looking for couples on a secret date.

After a silence, Gu Fuzhou asked, “What are your names?”

“Jiang Shiyue.”

“L-Lin Lan.”

Gu Fuzhou thought for a while, then suddenly smiled. “That’s fine, then. You certainly won’t die tomorrow.”

Jiang Shiyue was shocked. “What? Why not?”

“Because your names are beautiful. In Great Yu, those with beautiful names are destined to live long lives.”

Jiang Shiyue was a bit confused. “You aren’t killing me today, Great General?”

“No. Go back and rest,” Gu Fuzhou said. “Xiaolinzi, spend the whole day before the battle with your Jiang-dage. There are twenty-four hours in a day—so if you miss an hour, or even a minute, you can’t call that a whole day.”

Jiang Shiyue was overjoyed. “Thank you, Great General! If I’m still alive in two days, I’ll…”

“Shh.” Gu Fuzhou put a finger to his own lips, saying seriously, “Saying that right before a battle is bad luck. Don’t do it next time.”

The great general’s word was law, so although Jiang Shiyue didn’t understand what Gu Fuzhou was getting at, he prostrated himself again and then left with Lin Lan.

Once they’d exited the tent, Lin Lan couldn’t help asking, “Jiang-dage, what were you going to say? ‘If you’re still alive…’”

As soon as his lover asked that, Jiang Shiyue completely forgot the great general’s warning. “If I’m still alive after the battle, I’ll ask for your hand in marriage. My brothers-in-arms from the capital say that lots of men there have male wives now. Even the great general married a gorgeous man.”

Lin Lan smiled through his tears. “How beautiful.”

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Two days later, Great Yu’s army attacked Yongliang. No matter how the attackers assailed them, however, Western Xia’s army wouldn’t budge.

Yongliang's defenses stayed firm; its walls were sturdy, over four zhang[30] in height.

Gu Fuzhou rode Little White, Shi Pei and Wu Youyuan at his side. The great general had gazed at Yongliang's gate many times, yet this was his first time realizing how tall it was.

Great flags whipped in the wind, cymbals clanged, and war drums thundered. At Gu Fuzhou's command, Great Yu's soldiers raised their weapons with a loud cry, then charged forward to take Yongliang.

At almost the same time, thousands of arrows poured like rain from the top of the ramparts. The foot soldiers in the very front jerked and fell; behind them, soldiers pushing battering rams trod over their bodies, filling in the gaps. Then the second wave of arrows struck them down, and the tide-like crowd drowned their bodies.

When the soldiers finally set the ladders against the walls, boulders rolled down from above to welcome them.

After that day, Gu Fuzhou never saw Jiang Shiyue again. He only saw Lin Lan sitting in a corner, silently weeping as he bit into a bun. A few days later, he no longer saw even Lin Lan.

Several days passed, and Yongliang refused to be retaken. The troops' morale dropped sharply, and their food supply was nearly spent. Injured, moaning soldiers were visible everywhere in the camp. Hu Ji couldn't even remember how long he'd been awake—injured soldiers kept coming in, as if there was an endless supply of them.

"Anything can happen when you take a city, especially a large one like Yongliang. Back at the beginning of this dynasty, the first emperor seized Luoyang, and he took an entire year and eight months to succeed!" Wu Youyuan was encouraging everyone ceaselessly. "At some point, the enemy will run out of arrows and boulders. As long as we hold our ground, we'll take the city in no time!"

Gu Fuzhou's voice was tired as he said, "I haven't once doubted that we could take Yongliang. The problem is that the Ghost Commander likewise doesn't doubt it. He knows that he can't retain Yongliang."

"But if he knows he'll lose it, why not surrender early instead of digging his heels in?"

“If I were him, then—knowing that I’d lose Yongliang sooner or later—I’d do so in a way that wastes my foe’s resources.”

“What resources do you mean?” Shi Pei asked.

“Great Yu’s men, horses, money, and food; its equipment; or…me,” Gu Fuzhou said calmly. “To Western Xia, no resource is more valuable to Great Yu than my life. From the enemy’s perspective, if Great Yu can’t take Yongliang quickly, we’ll face a ration shortage—in which case it will be reasonable to temporarily halt the battle. If I pretended to halt the battle and tried to lure the enemy into a trap, the Ghost Commander would come out, even if he knew it was a setup. After all, he’d lose Yongliang anyway, and after we take the city, none of Western Xia’s army would be allowed to live. If they could take me—the great general—down with them, wouldn’t that just be perfect?”

Everyone exchanged glances. “General, you plan to…” The rest of the sentence got stuck in Shi Pei’s throat for a moment. “…lure them out using *yourself* as bait?”

“No!” Wu Youyuan exclaimed. “I’d rather we all die in battle than see you risk your life!”

Gu Fuzhou clicked his tongue. “And I just said that you’d grown.” It seemed that Wu Youyuan hadn’t grown at all.

“General, please rethink this.” Shi Pei’s eyebrows furrowed tightly. “Western Xia is at the end of their rope and can’t hold out much longer. Why would you…”

“Do you think I want to do it? We’re out of food. *We* can’t hold out much longer either.” When he saw their expressions, Gu Fuzhou laughed. “Technically, I won’t really be risking my life. Come here.”

Everyone gathered to watch as Gu Fuzhou pointed to a spot on the map. “This area is shaped like the neck of a gourd. I’ll lure the enemy there. Then Wu Youyuan will lead a thousand cavalrymen in from the other valley. That way, we’ll trap them inside, and they won’t be able to escape.”

Shi Pei considered this for a long time. “But what if…what if… General, if you need someone as bait, I’m willing to replace you!”

“I commend you for your bravery, but I’ll be honest—your life isn’t that valuable to Western Xia. Not so valuable that they’d risk death for it. Don’t worry; I trust that Youyuan will come save me.” Gu Fuzhou stood in the dappled shadows, smiling. “Youyuan, may I put my trust in you?”

Wu Youyuan swallowed. “General…”

“I’ll go with the general,” Shen Huaishi volunteered. “I promised Imperial Physician Lin that I’d protect his husband.”

Gu Fuzhou mulled that over. “You can come, but only if Hu Ji says you’ve recovered enough to return to the battlefield.”

“I have,” Shen Huaishi said immediately.

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Over the next two days, Great Yu’s offensives gradually subsided, and Western Xia had a brief respite.

Since Great Yu was only pretending to halt the battle, they couldn’t summon the soldiers back to camp in broad daylight. Western Xia’s Ghost Commander was focused on Gu Fuzhou; if he couldn’t locate Gu Fuzhou, he wouldn’t make any rash decisions. Gu Fuzhou ordered his subordinates to take their supplies and split into three groups. The group led by the general himself traveled to the gourd’s neck, as the top brass had previously discussed.

Gu Fuzhou rode Little White, staring into the night sky. Suddenly, he noticed his heart beating a bit too fast. “Oh, no.”

“What is it, General?” Shen Huaishi quickly asked from behind him.

“Nothing.” Gu Fuzhou laughed quietly. “I’m just a bit…”

A bit scared.

But right then, he was Gu Fuzhou, the great general who never lost a battle—the war god known to every citizen of Great Yu. The real Gu Fuzhou wouldn’t be scared, so *he* couldn’t be scared. At least not in front of these soldiers who trusted him.

He thought about Lin Qingyu.

If only Lin Qingyu were there. If Gu Fuzhou's wife were by his side, the general could hold his waist, shamelessly acting cute and complaining. He wanted to tell his wife that he was exhausted—so worried that he couldn't fall asleep at night. He didn't want to lead this army, nor fight this war, at all. He just wanted to be a salted fish and stick to Lin Qingyu all day, every day.

But he was Gu Fuzhou. Gu Fuzhou ought to be proud and victorious. He ought to be confident, calm, and sure of himself. He had already striven to be, and hopefully he wouldn't disappoint his men.

Gu Fuzhou took a deep breath, reassuring himself. "There's nothing to be scared of. I've already planned this out."

Then he heard himself say, "I'm not scared at all."

Chapter 99

As Gu Fuzhou walked out of the camp, a light snow began to fall from the sky. This was undoubtedly the quietest journey he'd ever taken; no war drums thundered, no soldiers chanted, and no flags waved—the snow had already frozen the flags solid, so they could no longer flutter in the wind.

Gu Fuzhou's squad left quietly without anyone seeing them off. Shi Pei and Wu Youyuan were each leading a large squad—attacking the city and preparing an ambush, respectively—and the remaining general was guarding the camp.

The squad rode slowly toward Zhuo County along the planned path, their horses leaving a trail of hoofprints in the snow.

"It's so quiet," a deputy general said. "So quiet that I'm not used to it."

"Huaishi ought to be quite used to this kind of silence," Gu Fuzhou remarked casually.

"Oh, right—you were originally a shadow guard, Shen-xiong. I imagine you worked in the shadows a lot too."

Shen Huaishi nodded, smiling.

The deputy general asked him another question. "Can you see far? And clearly in the night?"

"Yes. Night vision is a skill that all shadow guards must possess."

"It's a pity that the enemy doesn't have eyes that good," Gu Fuzhou said. "Have everyone light their torches. If Western Xia sent reinforcements, it'd be nice if we could lure them all over."

In the quiet night, a line of torches flickered in a winding trail, as if signaling their position to the enemy. Anyone with a brain could see that they'd done so intentionally—but although Western Xia's cornered army knew that this was a trap, they had to jump into it anyway.

That was entirely because the trap involved Gu Fuzhou—the war god of Great Yu, who'd killed Western Xia's crown prince, as well as dozens of generals and innumerable soldiers. Rather than starving to death or becoming prisoners of war after they lost the city, the forces occupying Yongliang preferred to bet their lives on dragging Gu Fuzhou to hell with them. After all, Zhao Mingwei was already dead; once Gu Fuzhou died, no one would be able to stop Western Xia's glorious plan to conquer Great Yu.

Reaching the neck of the gourd-shaped valley, Gu Fuzhou and his soldiers found nothing out of the ordinary. The silence only meant that danger was approaching, however. The snow fell more heavily onto their bows and swords.

Soon, the sound of hoofbeats reached their ears, and the ground began to shake. It was obvious just from the noise that the enemy had great numbers.

That shocked the deputy general. "Why did they send so many troops here? Have they abandoned Yongliang?"

Gu Fuzhou wasn't surprised. "They know they can't keep it, so why bother trying?"

The Ghost Commander was indeed a ghost to be able to lead so many cavalrymen out of Yongliang covertly. At this point, Shi Pei had probably already taken a chance and entered the city. And the more enemy soldiers were here at the gourd's neck, the fewer there would be in Yongliang.

"Don't panic," Gu Fuzhou reassured his men. "Even if they sent every last soldier, they'd still be weaker than us. The best-case scenario is if they really *have* all come. That way, we wouldn't have to waste time tracking down stragglers."

The hoofbeats grew closer and closer. When Gu Fuzhou looked at the horizon, he saw black horses swarming toward them like a tide, kicking up waves of snow. Then battle cries broke the silence of the night, and moonlight glinted coldly off the steel of the foe's raised swords.

"Take care not to underestimate the enemy, Great General," Shen Huaishi warned. "These soldiers clearly aren't afraid of death. Thus, they have the courage to do anything."

Gu Fuzhou nodded and tugged his horse's reins. "Relay this order: Enter the gourd's neck as we fight, and lure them toward it."

The winter wind howled plaintively as the sharp sound of blade clanging against blade filled the valley. The heavy scent of copper filled their noses, red blood staining white steel. Even the ground and sky were covered in red; it was as if the entire world were crimson.

When they lured the enemy to the neck of the gourd, the ground suddenly shook ten times more intensely than before. The deputy general grinned. "That must be General Wu and his men!"

"No!" Shen Huaishi exclaimed, staring into the distance. "It's—" He cut himself off abruptly.

The deputy general's eyes widened, a shocked expression replacing his smile. "It's Western Xia! It's their reinforcements!"

More horses thundered toward them, the noise so loud that it roiled the snow on the mountain, forming tall waves of white powder.

"This is good," Gu Fuzhou said, pretending to be relaxed. "The reinforcements coming to us means that Yongliang is safe. They've made a long journey, but we've been resting here the entire time. We couldn't fight five of them each, but we can definitely fight two-on-one."

Seeing Gu Fuzhou so calm calmed everyone else down too. "My brethren, onward!" yelled the deputy general. "General Wu is waiting for us in the gourd!"

Gu Fuzhou's guess was correct. Western Xia's reinforcements were arriving hastily after a long journey through the freezing wind and snow, so they were already exhausted. They knew that they would likely lose, but they still had to come.

Their goal wasn't to win this battle, nor even to keep Yongliang. They only wanted Gu Fuzhou's life. It was easily worth the lives of tens of thousands of Western Xia's soldiers.

Shen Huaishi quickly noticed something amiss. "General, there are many experienced assassins among these reinforcements. They'll certainly all be targeting you."

“They’re doing so much just to take my life,” Gu Fuzhou said with a resigned sigh.

“Please don’t leave my side, General. I won’t give the assassins a single chance to approach you,” Shen Huaishi said, then abruptly frowned, lowering his head to look at his barely healed injury. He quickly raised his head again to focus on fighting the enemy.

Great Yu’s troops retreated as they fought, luring Western Xia’s army into the gourd, but no hidden allies leaped out.

“What happened?” Having struck down a number of enemy soldiers, the deputy general circled back to Gu Fuzhou. “Where’s General Wu?!”

Gu Fuzhou’s expression was grave as he looked at the snowy mountains on either side of the valley. “Fuck,” he finally said.

“The avalanche,” Shen Huaishi said quietly. “The avalanche delayed General Wu.”

The other soldiers were likewise worried about their allies’ absence. Still, they couldn’t afford to take any attention away from the incoming swords that wanted their lives.

“This is a bit unfortunate, my brothers,” Gu Fuzhou admitted. “But it’s all right. I’m sure Wu Youyuan is trying his best to get here. We’ll just wait for him.” Suddenly he laughed, the sound loud and unafraid. “The picturesque mountains, a beauty back home—I’d be denied so much if I died here.” With that, he snatched the deputy general’s bow and arrows and fluidly shot toward an enemy general.

The arrow flew like a meteor. They couldn’t see where it landed, but it acted as a signal, rallying the worried soldiers. They no longer cared where the allies meant to ambush the foe were; instead they were rejuvenated, killing as many enemies as they could in battle.

In order to convince the enemy that it would win, Gu Fuzhou had only brought three thousand cavalry officers with him. Without Wu Youyuan’s reinforcements for the ambush, they were very much at a disadvantage, but no one backed down from the challenge. They believed that the reinforcements would come, so all they needed to do was hold their ground until then.

After having sat behind a desk for so long, Gu Fuzhou was finally standing on the battlefield. After three years of inaction, his Qingyun Jiuzhou spear had finally come out of retirement. This was only killing people, right? He already knew how to do that.

This brutal battle went on until the sun finally rose, the snow stopped falling, and bodies littered the valley. Soldiers fell one by one from their horses in front of Gu Fuzhou until only thirty of the three thousand troops remained.

Gu Fuzhou's horse, Little White, had already died in the rain of arrows. Like the other foot soldiers, Gu Fuzhou too now faced hundreds of enemies while equipped only with a suit of armor and a spear. But it was all right. It was all right—Wu Youyuan would arrive anytime.

Just be patient. Wait some more.

Suddenly, Shen Huaishi saw a ghostly figure approach them. He shot out, decisively slitting the figure's throat with a dagger.

But he'd been so hasty that he'd aggravated an old wound, causing him to pause for the briefest of moments. In that fraction of a second, a single arrow flew past him, right toward Gu Fuzhou.

"General!" Shen Huaishi yelled.

Gu Fuzhou heard him, but he continued to block a sword aimed at a foot soldier.

A wave of pain hit Gu Fuzhou. He hadn't even realized what'd happened when Shen Huaishi dashed toward him, his face ghastly pale. He slowly lowered his head, looking at the arrow in his chest, and belatedly let out a bitter smile.

No one could win every battle they fought. Gu Fuzhou had won so many through pure luck; in the end, though, he'd still lost to chance.

Next a second arrow was shot. A third one… Innumerable arrows flew toward him from every direction.

His Qingyun Jiuzhou spear sank deep into the snow, supporting him so he didn't collapse to his knees, until Shen Huaishi finally arrived and steadied him.

Fear finally showed in Gu Fuzhou's perpetually casual expression.

He didn’t fear death. He’d died twice already, so he had experience with it. Death wasn’t scary at all to him.

What he feared was Lin Qingyu having to face his husband’s death. That fear overwhelmed even Gu Fuzhou’s physical pain.

I’m sorry. In the end, he couldn’t be a general who protected the land, nor a hero. On the brink of death, all he could think about was Lin Qingyu.

At that point, he vaguely heard someone yell, “Yongliang’s retaken! Yongliang has been taken back!”

“General Wu is here!”

Drenched in blood after fighting the entire night, Shen Huaishi finally lowered his sword. He gripped Gu Fuzhou’s hand tightly, and saw the great general say with a smile, “It hurts so much.”

Even more than the last two times.

Shen Huaishi had many skills, and he walked constantly on the brink of life and death, but he’d never felt so helpless. He hated how awkward he was, unable to say even a single word of comfort.

Crimson blood spilled from Gu Fuzhou’s lips. “I heard…that we won?”

“Yes,” Shen Huaishi said, trying to smile. “We won. We did.”

“Then can you save me now? I…I can’t die.” Gu Fuzhou leaned against Shen Huaishi, his eyes widening ever further, begging almost desperately, “He’s still waiting for me. I promised him. I can’t lie to him… Don’t let me die. He’ll cry.”

Shen Huaishi was already weeping. “I’ll save you, General. Hold on—Physician Hu will have a way. I’ll take you to him.”

When he heard the word “physician,” Gu Fuzhou smiled slightly. He wanted to say something, but then suddenly jerked and vomited a large mouthful of blood. Even with Shen Huaishi’s support, he could no longer stand and slowly slid to the ground.

“General!” Shen Huaishi dropped to the ground with him, gathering Gu Fuzhou in his arms. He tried to put pressure on Gu Fuzhou’s wound, but blood spilled from between his fingers, flowing ceaselessly into the snow. The red droplets bloomed like the blossoms of a sprawling peach tree orchard; they looked out of place in winter, but they were as beautiful and warm as spring.

No matter what he tried, Gu Fuzhou only bled more and more.

He couldn’t staunch the bleeding. He couldn’t stop it. He couldn’t do anything about it.

Gu Fuzhou’s vision gradually blurred. He could no longer breathe; he felt as if a boulder had been placed on his chest. Each breath tore through him with searing pain, and the flowing blood sapped his body temperature, leaving him colder and colder, frozen to the bone.

He…was going to die again.

He’d lied to Lin Qingyu. He was going to die. He wouldn’t return.

If he’d known that this would be the ending, he wouldn’t have confessed to Lin Qingyu, wouldn’t have kissed him, wouldn’t have sullied him. He’d already broken Lin Qingyu’s heart once, and he was going to do it a second time. How awful he was.

He knew Lin Qingyu. His wife would never forget him, but he also wouldn’t do anything dumb like follow him in death. He would live, cold and numb, for the rest of his life.

If…if Lin Qingyu could lose his memories, that would be best. If he could forget all these years, if he could forget Gu Fuzhou, then he might be happier. A pill to fake death existed, so why couldn’t someone create a pill that erased memories?

After all, his wish was for Lin Qingyu to always be happy. It had been his wish when he was seventeen, and it was his wish now.

Hm... His eyelids were so heavy. This dizzying darkness felt similar to last time. Then, he remembered, Lin Qingyu hadn’t stopped him from closing his eyes. So, this time, could he also…

“General!” Shen Huaishi called in a choked voice. “General, hold on. Physician Hu is almost here. Don’t close your eyes! Imperial Physician Lin —Lin Qingyu is still waiting for you!”

Gu Fuzhou’s eyes flew open, and the general gripped Shen Huaishi’s hand tighter.

He couldn’t close his eyes. He’d wait for medical attention. Once the physician came, he would heal him.

Otherwise Lin Qingyu wouldn’t be happy even if he lost his memories. Lin Qingyu would only be happy if Gu Fuzhou was alive.

So he couldn’t die… He had to survive.

After great effort, his vision became clear again. He saw a ray of light pierce the clouds.

“It’s daybreak?” he murmured.

Tears covered Shen Huaishi’s face. “Yes, it’s daybreak.”

“Good.” Most bad things happened at night. Dawn always symbolized hope. Perhaps he really was about to be saved. So long as he didn’t close his eyes, he would survive.

Gu Fuzhou watched the light on the horizon with longing and regret, the brightness reflecting in his eyes as he fell still.

“General…General!”

The last bit of light vanished from Gu Fuzhou’s eyes. Those eyes that used to hold the stars, used to hold hidden smiles, were now empty—but he still hadn’t closed them.

At the beginning of the third year of the Chuxi reign, Gu Fuzhou perished outside of Yongliang, pierced by countless arrows.

Chapter 100

As soon as Wu Youyuan arrived with his men, Western Xia's army collapsed. Or, rather, they had already lost their drive the moment Gu Fuzhou fell. As soon as they achieved that goal, Western Xia's troops immediately retreated. Great Yu's soldiers chased relentlessly, eyes red, battle-hungry, capturing enemy generals and slaughtering enemy soldiers.

After that night, a river of blood ran through the valley. Meanwhile, Shi Pei hung a flag from Yongliang's walls. This key northwestern city had finally returned to Great Yu.

In that last battle, Great Yu had retaken Yongliang and chased Western Xia's weakened army north of the border. They killed scores of enemies and lost just three thousand of their own. It was a glorious victory, yet there was no joy in the barracks.

In the howling wind, white banners hung from the tents, and paper money flew. Firelight illuminated everyone's pale, haggard faces. Wu Youyuan knelt in front of Gu Fuzhou's altar for twenty-four hours without food or drink. He clutched the sword that hung from his belt, his eyes bloodshot. He felt guilty, enraged, and above all, murderous. If Shi Pei hadn't held him back, he would've traveled all the way to Western Xia's capital and destroyed the entire nation, sacrificing their king to the great general's lost soul.

From that moment on, this would be Wu Youyuan's life's goal.

Shen Huaishi took off his armor and walked into the tent in his inner clothes. He looked at Gu Fuzhou's altar, swallowed hard, and held back tears as he lit three sticks of incense.

Then Shi Pei handed him an emergency message, saying hoarsely, "Please, Shen-xiong."

Snow had blocked the road back to the capital, so not even the fastest horse could outrun Shen Huaishi. Yet when he returned to the capital with the results of the battle and news of Gu Fuzhou's death, half a month had already passed.

At that point, Qinzheng Hall's most recent message from the northwest had arrived a fortnight earlier. That message said that Yongliang's defenses were solid, and that the enemy refused to leave the city, so Great Yu's army was making little progress. In addition, snow had completely blocked the road from Guangyang to Yongliang, so the northwestern camp's rations were low, making the troops uneasy.

The throne had been removed and replaced by an ornate chair. When Xiaosongzi entered Qinzheng Hall with tea, he saw Lin Qingyu sitting in the chair, his head propped on his hand, dark shadows beneath his long eyelashes.

Xiaosongzi walked quietly, thinking that Lin Qingyu had fallen asleep. Since a "sudden illness" had befallen the emperor, he'd been resting in his chambers; he no longer visited Qinzheng Hall. Lin Qingyu half owned the place nowadays. His word was the emperor's word, and he was the one who read memorials, met with officials, and discussed worldly matters. Though he wasn't prime minister in name, he was more than that in practice.

Lin Qingyu had such nerve that he might well be called a traitor; he'd done whatever he wanted, even imprisoning the emperor. But when they saw armed men everywhere in the palace, no official dared complain. In an attempt to speak with the emperor, they asked to see the empress dowager, but she only said, "I'm old now. Now that I lack the energy to sit behind the throne and listen to court proceedings, Imperial Physician Lin can fortunately share the burden."

"But Lord Lin is merely an imperial physician. It's unheard of for an imperial physician to lead court and command officials. This is an embarrassment to Great Yu!"

"Oh—you've reminded me," the empress dowager said neutrally. "What official role do you think I should give him?"

No one said a single word to that.

The position of prime minister had remained vacant ever since Cui Lian's retirement to his hometown. Some people said that, sooner or later, Lin Qingyu would no longer be Imperial Physician Lin—instead, he'd be Prime Minister Lin.

But things had to progress in an orderly fashion. Promoting him directly from imperial physician to prime minister would truly be too much—the court still needed to save some face. In the end, the empress dowager gave Lin Qingyu the title of third-rank superintendent minister.

When Xiaosongzi lightly set the tea upon the table, Lin Qingyu's eyes opened. Thinking that he'd woken Lin Qingyu, Xiaosongzi quickly knelt. "This humble servant deserves death for disturbing Lord Lin's slumber."

"My waking up had nothing to do with you. I sleep lightly," Lin Qingyu said. "Rise."

Nightmares plagued Lin Qingyu every evening, and he woke up feeling restless and uneasy. To avoid those nightmares, he hadn't slept in three nights, only napped during the daytime. During this ordeal, Lin Qingyu grew thin, and his face became haggard and sharp.

After drinking the tea that Xiaosongzi had brought, he asked, "Any news from the northwest?" It was the third time he'd asked that day.

Xiaosongzi shook his head. "The last memorial from the northwest only just arrived, Lord Lin. Further news probably wouldn't get here that quickly."

"But he used to write to me every few days," Lin Qingyu said softly.

"You said yourself that the northwest is at a turning point. Great General Gu must be too busy."

As busy as he was, he couldn't ignore Lin Qingyu's letters.

A eunuch entered. "Lord Lin, His Majesty has asked for you."

"I understand," Lin Qingyu said coolly.

He'd had Xiao Jie imprisoned in his chambers ever since the change in Qinzheng Hall. At first, Xiao Jie had asked relentlessly every day to see him. But when Lin Qingyu visited, all Xiao Jie had asked was Xi Rong's condition, begging Lin Qingyu to spare his half brother. Then Lin Qingyu prescribed Xiao Jie some medicine to calm him down, so he hadn't made a fuss in a while.

In all honesty, he'd treated Xiao Jie quite well. He hadn't killed the emperor, and he'd permitted him to eat and sleep well in the palace. Aside

from having no freedom, Xiao Jie was still that same emperor who'd ignored the court.

In the emperor's chambers, Lin Qingyu saw Xiao Jie standing in front of his desk. His hair was down and messy, and he had a brush in his hand, as if he'd just finished writing something.

"Your Majesty."

"You're here." Xiao Jie's eyes were empty. "Here's my abdication memorial."

Two eunuchs brought a chair, and Lin Qingyu sat down. "What is the meaning of this, Your Majesty?"

"Isn't this what you wanted?" Xiao Jie asked numbly.

Lin Qingyu straightened his clothes. "If this was what I wanted, why would I wait until now?"

"I'm begging you, just take it!" Xiao Jie suddenly screamed. "I never wished to become emperor! Why did you force me to?!"

If he hadn't become emperor, he would still be at home with A-Rong, and his greatest worry would be what to eat next. They wouldn't have had to worry about the northwest, and they certainly wouldn't have ended up in this position.

It had been Lin Qingyu who'd pushed him; it was all Lin Qingyu's fault.

Lin Qingyu laughed softly. "I *forced* you to? From the beginning to now, have I ever forced you to do anything?"

Xiao Jie's lips trembled. "You approached me and said…"

"The one I approached was Xi Rong," Lin Qingyu interrupted. "It was also Xi Rong I discussed matters with. Let me ask you, Your Majesty—did I ever once say anything to *you* about taking the throne?"

Xiao Jie trembled as he raised his head.

"I wasn't the one who forced you to become emperor. Your A-Rong did that," Lin Qingyu said cruelly. "Everything you've reaped, you sowed yourself. If either of you had told me 'no' back then, this throne wouldn't belong to you."

Xiao Jie's eyes were wide, but Lin Qingyu didn't know how much he'd chosen to hear. "No. It's not like that," Xiao Jie insisted. "If you hadn't existed, A-Rong and I would've been fine."

Lin Qingyu didn't want to waste more time on him. "Since Your Majesty is adamant about abdicating, I'll accept your offer." He glanced at Xiaosongzi, who quickly took the memorial. "But I must say this—whether you're emperor or not, you cannot save Xi Rong."

Tears welled in Xiao Jie's eyes. "Let me see him. Let me be with him…"

Lin Qingyu scoffed. His answer was obvious.

"You're going to kill him anyway," Xiao Jie said. "Can't you even agree to this one request?"

"No," Lin Qingyu said coldly. "Why should I let you see him when I can't see my husband?"

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After Xiao Jie's abdication, Lin Qingyu imprisoned him in Jinyang Palace for life. Now the late emperor's only blood descendant was the prince of Huai, Xiao Li. Faraway kings repeatedly sent memorials asking to enter the capital to offer the empress dowager New Year's greetings, but everyone knew their true intentions.

Meanwhile, the mysterious imperial preceptor viewed the stars and divined the nation's fate once again: *The ninth star of the constellation Wei shows that the true heir has been restored, and his soul will return so that he can rule the empire.*

Many old officials in Great Yu considered heritage extremely important. According to the imperial preceptor, the soulnessness that afflicted the prince of Huai could be healed after he took the throne; after hearing this, people's objections to making him the heir decreased dramatically. The main reason for that, though, was that their objections were completely useless. The army was on Lin Qingyu's side, and Empress Dowager Wen ruled the court officials. If the throne wasn't given to her

own son, Empress Dowager Wen wouldn’t be afraid to depose another emperor.

Under these circumstances, it was just lucky that Great Yu still belonged to the Xiao family.

The day Xiao Li ascended the throne, Lin Qingyu personally helped him don his beaded hat. The seventeen-year-old sat quietly, allowing himself to be repositioned. His beaded veil obscured his delicate features. The hat was heavy and large, and Xiao Li kept trying to take it off, but Lin Qingyu stopped him. “Don’t move.”

Xiao Li obediently lowered his hand.

“Let’s go.”

Lin Qingyu finally wouldn’t need to kneel for this coronation ceremony. Holding Xiao Li’s hand, he walked past hundreds of officials onto the stone steps and toward Zichen Hall, the seat of power.

He stood looking down on the world. He saw the officials and princes bow their heads, shouting “Long live the emperor!” Beside him, the emperor sat on the throne, dressed in black dragon robes, his expression blank and empty. Only sometimes, when his gaze met Lin Qingyu’s, would the young man smile beautifully.

After he took the throne, Xiao Li moved from Ci’an Palace to Xingqing Palace. Without his mother, though, the young man with the intelligence of a three-year-old could only be lulled to sleep by Auntie Xiujiao.

After the ceremony finished, there was still a lot for Lin Qingyu to do in Qinzheng Hall. Late at night, lights still shone brightly there, and a mountain of memorials sat on Lin Qingyu’s desk even after midnight. Growing sleepy, Lin Qingyu was about to take some medicine to keep himself awake when someone behind him said, “Why is Physician Lin sleeping here?”

Lin Qingyu froze. He turned slowly and met a pair of twinkling eyes, smiling and young.

Is this a dream?

Under the palace lights, the youth was as handsome as a clear night sky, his brows sharp and his features delicate. He seemed more collected now than he had been three years ago. His hair was cropped, and he wore a loose short-sleeved shirt with odd symbols on it. He also wore long black pants. When his legs weren't concealed by the robes worn in Great Yu, Lin Qingyu could see how straight and long they were.

It was his second time meeting this young man.

The youth walked toward him, sat down on the table, and smiled at him. "It's been a while, Qingyu."

Lin Qingyu opened his mouth. "Jiang Xing…?"

Jiang Xing smiled. "As I guessed, you knew my name a long time ago."

Lin Qingyu's chest felt tight, but he refused to think about the reason for that sudden pain. As if trying not to look at the young man, he lowered his head. "Why…why would I dream of you?" he murmured, panicked.

Jiang Xing held his face, smiling. "Because you miss me, darling."

Lin Qingyu raised his eyes to look at the young man—just to look at him. His eyes weren't rimmed with red, and he didn't feel any discomfort. Thus, when a tear slipped from the corner of his eye and landed on Jiang Xing's hand, not even Lin Qingyu himself knew.

Chapter 101

WHEN LU WANCHENG passed away, Lin Qingyu hadn't cried. When Jiang Xing first returned, he hadn't cried. When bidding farewell to Gu Fuzhou, he still hadn't cried. But today—after all that time, after meeting his husband's soul in a dream—he cried.

Everything about the dream had felt so real—so real that Jiang Xing still felt his heart beating in his chest. The large, empty hall, the memorials on the table, the scent of ink in the air, the flickering firelight… Each tear that fell from Lin Qingyu's eyes seemed to strike Jiang Xing's own chest.

He'd seen Lin Qingyu hold back tears before, but he'd never seen him cry like that. He wasn't frowning, nor was he choked up. He only looked at Jiang Xing, tears falling silently.

Pain erupted in Jiang Xing's body—worse than illness, worse than poison, worse even than countless arrows. It hurt so much that he wanted to cry—but he couldn't. If he cried too, who would comfort Lin Qingyu? He mustn't cry in front of Lin Qingyu. That wouldn't be cool at all.

Jiang Xing smiled through tears. "What's wrong, darling? We haven't seen each other in so long. Why are you crying? You don't like my original body?"

Lin Qingyu only looked at him silently. After a long time, he shook his head.

Long, sculpted fingers brushed away Lin Qingyu's tears. "I'm glad that I could see you in my original form," Jiang Xing said. "I hope that you can be happy too."

It was their last time seeing each other. He didn't want Lin Qingyu to be upset.

Lin Qingyu seemed to understand what he meant, but he also seemed to be trying to convince himself of it. "Did you come back because I missed you?" he asked, dazed.

“Yeah. As they say, at night, you dream about whatever you thought of during the day.” Jiang Xing’s tone was light and soft. “You miss me, so you’re dreaming of me.”

But why did you *come, not Gu Fuzhou?*

He’d once struggled to recall Jiang Xing’s appearance and been unable to remember anything. But the youth in front of him was so real, so alive; his eyes reflected Lin Qingyu’s image, and the palm cupping Lin Qingyu’s face was so warm. Every detail was so perfect.

In the end, Lin Qingyu couldn’t ask *that* question—as if this could be a normal dream if he didn’t ask, if he didn’t believe.

He raised a trembling hand to touch the young man’s forehead; the young man took it and put it to his lips.

“You haven’t changed much from three years ago,” Lin Qingyu said softly.

He’d made Lin Qingyu feel better. Or, rather, Lin Qingyu had made himself feel better.

Jiang Xing swallowed. “People don’t age in dreams.” He laughed. “What? You thought I was too old before, but now you’re saying I’m too young? Don’t forget, I’m only a year younger than you.”

Lin Qingyu laughed too, the sound broken and frail yet clear and beautiful. “It makes sense that you like your original body best.”

“Of course. Lu Wancheng was too sickly and weak, and Gu Fuzhou’s strength was excessive. Neither of them suited me.”

“I’ll remember.” Lin Qingyu locked eyes with him. “I’ll remember your original form.”

“No,” Jiang Xing said. “It’s good to forget.”

“It’s not good. It’s not good at all!” All of a sudden, Lin Qingyu became inconsolably panicked again. “I have to remember. I don’t want to forget. Don’t let me forget…”

Jiang Xing had never seen Lin Qingyu so helpless. He quickly embraced him, saying soothingly, “You won’t forget. My darling has an eidetic memory. He’s amazing.”

“But last time…last time I forgot.” Lin Qingyu pressed his face against the young man’s chest, desperately trying to hold back his roaring emotions.

Jiang Xing wanted him to be happy—he couldn’t cry again. “That’s because, last time, I didn’t stay long enough,” Jiang Xing lied. “This time, I’ll stay a long time.”

Lin Qingyu clutched Jiang Xing’s shirt. The material was softer than anything he’d ever touched. The young man’s aura was pure and fresh, and it enveloped him completely.

He wouldn’t mind any body that Jiang Xing used. As long as the soul inside was Jiang Xing’s, Lin Qingyu would like his form and fall in love. Yet at the same time, he couldn’t deny that—in the entire world—only Jiang Xing’s original body had made him fall in love at first sight.

Only the Jiang Xing who’d returned to his original body was the complete Jiang Xing.

“A long time… How long?” asked Lin Qingyu.

Jiang Xing was quiet for a moment. “We’ll have at least a night. That’ll make up for our incomplete date before.”

Our date before? Pain ripped through Lin Qingyu’s heart. “A date of one day. And there are twenty-four hours in a day. So if we miss an hour, or even a minute, we can’t call that a whole day.”

Jiang Xing smiled. “So you remember.”

Of course he remembered. How could he not? That day, he hadn’t finished his date with Jiang Xing, but he’d thought he’d have many chances in the future. He’d thought that they had a lot of time… He’d really thought so.

“When you return from the northwest,” Lin Qingyu began, stubbornly lying to himself, “when you return, I won’t care about anything else. I’m going to lock you up and watch you every second of the day. You won’t be able to go anywhere. You’ll only be allowed to be with me every day—every twenty-four hours.”

Jiang Xing tilted his head and closed his eyes. When he reopened them, he was still smiling. “Okay. But, darling, why not think about what

you want to do tonight?”

Lin Qingyu buried his face in Jiang Xing’s chest, not answering. Jiang Xing didn’t press. It would be good even to embrace each other in silence all night.

After a long time, Lin Qingyu pushed him away and pointed to a spot on his shirt. “What’s that?”

“Huh…?” Jiang Xing looked down at his chest. “That’s my school crest. I’m wearing my school uniform.”

“How do you take it off?”

Jiang Xing froze. “Qingyu…?”

“I want to…invite you again,” Lin Qingyu said calmly.

Jiang Xing was so shocked that he couldn’t say anything.

“Don’t reject me again, Jiang Xing,” Lin Qingyu said, his voice shaking.

A moment later, Lin Qingyu’s vision wobbled. The young man in his thin clothes had picked Lin Qingyu up, and he walked quickly to the bed.

Once he’d been placed on that bed, Lin Qingyu remembered that there *was* no bed in Qinzheng Hall. But Jiang Xing explained, “This is a dream, darling. You can have anything in a dream.”

Lin Qingyu wasn’t in the mood to think about such things. He leaned closer to Jiang Xing and placed a kiss at the corner of his lips.

That kiss seemed to flip a switch in the young man’s body. Lin Qingyu sank deep into the bed. His hairpin was pulled out in the flurry of lips and teeth, and his hair spilled onto the pillow.

If Jiang Xing had still been Gu Fuzhou, locks of their hair would again have intertwined. But Jiang Xing had short hair right now, and when he leaned down to kiss Lin Qingyu, the strands over his forehead just blocked his eyes a bit.

Jiang Xing’s tongue wasn’t small at all.

Lin Qingyu wore the heavy, intricate robes of an official, which consisted of layer upon layer. As he reached up, gently touching the youth’s short hair, his wide sleeves slid down and revealed two pale arms.

He wouldn’t feel cold in a dream.

Once his own robes had been removed, Lin Qingyu found himself stymied by Jiang Xing’s clothes. But Jiang Xing taught him how to remove them, step by step. Then he asked, “Aren’t they convenient? Much more convenient than the clothes in Great Yu.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Do you…know how?”

Jiang Xing smiled. “Guess.”

In the dream, the night was late, and the candles flickered.

A hand weakly grasped the beads of the curtain that hung by the bed. Suddenly, that hand clenched, knuckles whitening. The bead curtain fell to the ground, and jade beads rolled everywhere, the clicking noises echoing in the empty hall.

Lin Qingyu closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, unable to keep tears from falling again…whether of pain or something else.

“Don’t cry, darling,” Jiang Xing said, his voice low. “If you keep crying, I’ll doubt my skills and get soft.”

“Liar. It’s so…so excited.”

Jiang Xing chuckled. “Wow. How can you tell?”

Lin Qingyu wanted to open his eyes, but a hand blocked them. “Don’t look at me. I’ll get embarrassed,” Jiang Xing said breathlessly.

Lin Qingyu could barely breathe too. He tried to smile. “I can feel you inside me.”

Jiang Xing’s breaths stopped, and he said no more. He only grabbed Lin Qingyu’s arms and wrapped them around his shoulders.

Only in a dream could they forget their responsibilities and indulge in pleasure.[31]

But after its endless gentleness, that dream could only shatter. Then what would be left?

Resting, Jiang Xing lay against Lin Qingyu’s shoulder. The first word he said was, “Sorry.”

When Lin Qingyu felt the wetness on his shoulder, the joy in his eyes was replaced by confusion. Was Jiang Xing…crying? This young man—he hadn’t wanted Lin Qingyu to cry, yet he’d begun weeping first.

“Qingyu, I’m sorry.” Jiang Xing held on to him like he didn’t know what to do, like a child trying his best but unable to do anything right. “I’m sorry…”

“Why are you crying?” Lin Qingyu asked.

They’d done the most intimate things people could. Why was he still weeping so despairingly?

Lin Qingyu wanted to push Jiang Xing away to see what he looked like crying, but he was too tired to. He could only feel the young man’s tears dampen his long hair.

When Jiang Xing stopped, he finally got up. Aside from his red-rimmed eyes, nothing about him seemed out of the ordinary. “Do I still look cool?” he asked nervously.

Lin Qingyu smiled. “Yes.”

Jiang Xing smiled and hugged him from behind. “Want to sleep?”

“No,” Lin Qingyu replied immediately.

So Jiang Xing stayed with him, whispering sweet words into his ear. When a hint of light appeared on the horizon, the young man looked toward the window. “It’s about time.”

Lin Qingyu froze.

“Tonight passed so quickly,” Jiang Xing sighed.

Lin Qingyu realized something, and the cruel truth that he’d intentionally forgotten rushed back to torture him. “No.” He held on to the young man with all his strength. “Jiang Xing, no… Don’t leave me alone again…”

Jiang Xing stroked his hair. “This is just a dream, Qingyu.”

“No…no!” Lin Qingyu opened his eyes, which brimmed with tears. His mask of calm fell apart, revealing the borderline insanity of a man who’d completely lost control. “You’re lying to me again, Jiang Xing! How many more times will you lie to me?”

The youth’s silhouette blurred. “This is the last time, Qingyu.”

The last…? Was this the end? No—he wanted to stay. He wanted to stay here with Jiang Xing.

Jiang Xing had promised him.

He had *promised*!

“Jiang Xing…!”

Lin Qingyu jerked awake from his dream. The sky was light, and he was alone in Qinzheng Hall.

He sat behind the desk alone. A pile of memorials sat on the desktop, and the candle had long since burnt out.

Lin Qingyu sat there, his face empty and blank. He remembered every word Jiang Xing had spoken and every movement he’d made—but he couldn’t remember his face.

Slowly, he closed his eyes, A single tear fell onto the very last memorial sent from the northwest.

At the same time, in nearby Xingqing Palace, the sleeping Xiao Li suddenly opened his eyes.

Chapter 102

THE FLICKERING CANDLELIGHT, the lingering scent of ink, the hazy curtains and sheets, and the weeping Lin Qingyu…had all disappeared.

But he still felt like he was in that dream—as if Lin Qingyu was still holding him tightly, begging him not to leave; still angry at him, accusing him of lying again.

For a moment he felt empty. Then Jiang Xing sat up abruptly and looked down at his chest. He raised a trembling hand to feel it.

His heart beat quickly and strongly, again and again. And he wasn't in agony from poison or countless arrows.

He hadn't died. He was still alive. And in contrast to the first two times this had happened, his new body didn't feel odd at all. It even felt inexplicably *right*, as if…as if he'd returned to his own body.

The joy of having survived only lasted a moment. Jiang Xing didn't have time to think about *why* he'd been reborn. Instead, he got out of bed barefoot and observed his surroundings.

Please, please let this be Great Yu. Let this be Lin Qingyu's world, please.

A terrifying thought flashed through his head: What if it wasn't? If it wasn't, was there a chance he could go back if he died again?

Beside his bed napped a eunuch. The room contained delicate palace lights and soft carpets, pillars emblazoned with a nine-clawed dragon, and a hanging black-and-gold dragon robe. He recognized this robe—only Great Yu's emperor could wear it.

Jiang Xing's limbs felt numb. He had never thought that he'd someday feel such intense gratitude.

He had transmigrated into Xiao Jie.

Whatever. Anyone would've been fine, so long as he stayed there.

Jiang Xing unconsciously raised his hand to cover his eyes. Tears spilled from between his fingers. He wanted to brush them away, but the more he wiped his eyes, the more tears came. His vision blurred, and he saw double. He doubted this new body could handle such strong emotion. In fact, it was impossible; not even an average person could.

Fuck. That was actual torture. He'd really thought that he was going to die. He'd thought that he'd never see Lin Qingyu again. He…he'd even had sex with Lin Qingyu, who'd cried the entire time. *Fuck.*

This wasn't the time for laziness. He had to make his way back to Lin Qingyu as quickly as he could. His wife was still waiting for him.

In that dream, Lin Qingyu had been in Qinzheng Hall. And at this moment, Jiang Xing was in Xiao Jie's chambers, which weren't far away.

He rushed outside wearing only light nightclothes. The wind was bone-chilling, but he didn't feel cold at all as his bare feet touched the stone steps.

A maid almost walked right into him, but he couldn't stop in time to let her go by—nor did he want to.

It was almost time for the emperor to get up. Auntie Xiujiao had brought hot water so the emperor could wash, but she hadn't even set foot inside his chambers when he rushed out. His face was no longer blank and expressionless; instead it was harried and almost desperate. A normal person wouldn't have looked so rushed even if they were running for their life.

Auntie Xiujiao froze completely, finally coming back to her senses as the young emperor flew past her. "Y-Your Majesty?! Someone help! The emperor is—he's going crazy!"

Once she'd shouted that, every last maid, eunuch, and guard on duty in Xingqing Palace leaped from their position. A few guards blocked Jiang Xing's path, and when he opened his mouth to tell them to scram, he found that he couldn't say a single word. He tried again, but to no avail.

When had Xiao Jie become mute…?

"Your Majesty!" Auntie Xiujiao hurried over with a basin of water. Seeing Jiang Xing's raw, red feet, she exclaimed, "Why did you run outside

by yourself?!”

She’d taken care of the emperor for a long time; she knew that, although he wasn’t all there, he was quite obedient. He also did everything unusually slowly—it seemed impossible that he’d run so quickly.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jiang Xing saw his reflection in the basin of water. His heart nearly stopped.

That wasn’t Xiao Jie’s face. It…it seemed to be his own face.

The hair of the young man reflected in the water was loose around his shoulders, and tears stained his cheeks. The face wasn’t exactly the same as his original face, but it was very similar. The differences mostly came down to hairstyle and his old habits.

Great Yu’s emperor was Xiao Jie, yet this body clearly didn’t belong to Xiao Jie.

Icy fear crept through him. He’d never seen any of these maids or eunuchs; not even the guards’ faces were familiar.

Who exactly was he? Was he still in Great Yu—but not in the same *world* as Lin Qingyu?

As he despaired, he finally heard a familiar voice. “What happened? What happened to the emperor?!”

“Eunuch Song! The emperor isn’t acting like himself! Quick—go find Lord Lin!” Auntie Xiujiao grabbed him, desperate.

Xiaosongzi grew agitated as well. “But what could Lord Lin do? He can’t cure the affliction to His Majesty’s soul. We should ask the imperial preceptor.”

“The imperial preceptor has been busy praying over the battle in the northwest,” a eunuch said. “He’s staying in Yanfu Palace. I’ll go get him now!”

So he *had* transmigrated into Xiao Li?

At that moment, as good as Jiang Xing’s upbringing was, he couldn’t help but want to curse, *Fuck you all! Why not just play with me until I die?*

Jiang Xing pushed away Auntie Xiujiao and Xiaosongzi and shoved the eunuchs and maids out of his path, rushing out of the crowd with only a

single care in the world. The guards could physically restrain him, but he was the emperor now, and who'd dare restrain him when he ran off so desperately? If they accidentally harmed him, the empress dowager would kill them. They could only chase after the emperor, protecting him on each side.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!"

"Quick—go tell the empress dowager in Ci'an Palace!" someone yelled.

In all three lives he'd lived before this, Jiang Xing had never run so quickly. He sprinted until his surroundings blurred and he tasted blood. The gates of Qinzheng Hall grew closer and closer.

Don't cry, darling. Your eyes will hurt. Your husband's almost here.

The eunuch standing guard in front of Qinzheng Hall only felt a breeze rush past him; then something unidentified charged into the hall, followed by a crowd from Xingqing Palace. If the eunuch hadn't known better, he'd have thought that Western Xia had invaded the capital and broken down the palace doors.

Every single thing inside Qinzheng Hall matched his dream. The memorial open on the table was exactly the same one.

But where was his wife? An entire grown man had just disappeared!

Lin Qingyu wasn't in the main hall, nor in the side halls, nor anywhere else inside. Had he actually gone and done something stupid…? No. Impossible. His darling wouldn't do anything even in the same ballpark as 'stupid.'

Auntie Xiujiao seemed to recognize that he was looking for something. "Your Majesty, what do you want?"

Now that he'd transmigrated twice, Jiang Xing understood the necessity of staying in character. Right now, though, his heart felt like it was on fire, and maintaining his character was the last thing on his mind. When he saw paper and a brush on a table, he rushed over without hesitation and lifted the brush.

At that point, Xiaosongzi had an epiphany. "Your Majesty, do you want Lord Lin?" he asked carefully.

Everyone knew that the new emperor would react unusually to just one person—he smiled only at Lord Lin.

Jiang Xing nodded violently.

“Lord Lin already left the palace,” Xiaosongzi told him, without requiring Jiang Xing to write anything. “He probably went home.”

Jiang Xing again lowered his head. He dipped the brush into the ink, and a bead of sweat slid down his forehead, dropping onto the paper and spreading.

“Look!” Auntie Xiujiao said in a trembling voice. “Is His Majesty trying to write?”

Everyone’s eyes bugged out in shock. They were about to crowd around to see what he would write when a voice said, “The imperial preceptor is here!”

Jiang Xing paused and looked toward the door.

Neither Ci’an Palace nor Yanfu Palace was far from Qinzheng Hall, and although he’d been summoned suddenly, Xu Junyuan didn’t need to wash or change his clothes. Thus, he naturally arrived more quickly than the empress dowager.

When the imperial preceptor met Jiang Xing’s gaze, his expression changed a bit. “I’m the only person required here. Everyone else should leave,” he ordered.

Auntie Xiujiao hesitated. “But the emperor…”

“Even if you stayed, you couldn’t do anything.” Xu Junyuan smiled mysteriously. “Only I can cure the emperor’s ailment. Should the empress dowager arrive, remember to announce her presence to me first.”

Auntie Xiujiao and Xiaosongzi exchanged glances, but then retreated with the maids and eunuchs, leaving only Jiang Xing and Xu Junyuan inside Qinzheng Hall.

Xu Junyuan greeted him. “May I ask who you are?” he inquired politely.

Jiang Xing hastily scribbled, *Jiang Xing.*

Xu Junyuan looked shocked. Then, after a moment's thought, he said, "I see now."

What do you mean?

Xu Junyuan smiled. "Jiang-gongzi, your soul has returned to this body—a compatible body. I congratulate you."

Why can't I talk?

"Don't worry, Jiang-gongzi. You aren't mute. It's just that your body hasn't spoken for seventeen years. It takes some time to get used to speaking."

Once the imperial preceptor explained that, Jiang Xing no longer worried about it. *Take me outside the palace to Gu Fuzhou's residence.*

Xu Junyuan looked conflicted. "That may be a bit difficult."

?

Xu Junyuan didn't understand the symbol Jiang Xing had drawn, but he could guess what he was trying to say. "The empress dowager is about to arrive. Do you think she'll let you go out, Jiang-gongzi?"

Jiang Xing calmed down a little. Empress Dowager Wen loved her son as much as life itself. She clearly wouldn't let him leave the palace under such circumstances.

Then bring Qingyu to me, he wrote, adding, *But first, tell him that I didn't die.*

"I can do that," Xu Junyuan said. "But he may not believe me. Do you have evidence to prove you survived, Jiang-gongzi?"

Jiang Xing sank into thought. He wanted to say too much to Lin Qingyu; under these circumstances, he couldn't waste words. The less time he spent on this, the less time Lin Qingyu would spend being sad.

First, he had to tell Lin Qingyu that he hadn't died. Everything else could wait until later, when they had time.

They had more time now, thankfully.

If odd, change; if even, remain the same; and the sign depends on the quadrant name. —Jiang Xing, he wrote.

Chapter 103

XU JUNYUAN HAD JUST taken the note from Jiang Xing when someone announced from outside, “The empress dowager is arriving!”

“Jiang-gongzi… No, I should call you ‘Your Majesty’ now.”

Jiang Xing’s expression made it clear that he thought the imperial preceptor was talking nonsense.

“I know you’re worried, Your Majesty, but to keep the empress dowager from suspecting anything and bringing about unnecessary trouble, I must ask that you bear with me for a bit.”

Xu Junyuan was reminding him to stay in character. Jiang Xing nodded and pointed to the door, telling Xu Junyuan to hurry and leave.

“Don’t worry, Your Majesty. I’ll bring your ‘letter’ to Lord Lin as quickly as I can.”

Xu Junyuan had just stopped talking when the empress dowager hurried inside, supported by Laifu. “Li-er!”

Pretending to be a war god had been a bit difficult, but anyone could behave as if they were dumb. Controlling his expression, Jiang Xing lowered his head without a word, already mostly successful at the act.

The empress dowager clasped Jiang Xing’s hand and found that he was freezing cold. “Quick—bring the firepan. What’s going on? Why did the emperor visit Qinzheng Hall out of the blue?”

Auntie Xiujiao told the empress dowager everything that had happened. Listening to her, Jiang Xing felt so frustrated that he nearly spoke on his own. Thankfully, Xiaosongzi added, “His Majesty seems to have come to find Lord Lin.”

“Then hurry and summon Lord Lin!” the empress dowager ordered.

Good. He could always trust Xiaosongzi.

Xu Junyuan knew that the empress dowager wouldn’t just let him leave. He glanced at Jiang Xing. “This humble official will instruct his

subordinates to do so.”

The empress dowager ordered the aunties to help Jiang Xing wash and change clothes. Then, as expected, she turned to Xu Junyuan. “Imperial Preceptor, the emperor…?”

“His Majesty is reacting to the world around him,” Xu Junyuan explained. “That’s good. An emotional outburst is better than having no emotions at all.”

The empress dowager was immediately thrilled. “You mean that the affliction to his soul is beginning to heal?”

Xu Junyuan smiled. “‘The ninth star of the Wei constellation shows that the true heir has been restored, and his soul will return to rule the empire.’ This prediction of mine was truly observed from the stars, Your Highness.”

The empress dowager was moved. “I’ve hoped for this day to come for so many years…”

After washing up, Jiang Xing changed into a fresh dragon robe. He stood in front of the mirror, observing the young man he saw reflected. Xiao Li was the spitting image of his real self, although he was a bit shorter and thinner than Jiang Xing had been when he was seventeen—probably because Xiao Li had been so busy playing with mud.

The empress dowager wanted to stay with her son, but Jiang Xing fell asleep after he’d washed, and the empress dowager herself found it difficult to hide her exhaustion, given her age.

“I shall stay in Xingqing Palace with His Majesty,” Xu Junyuan said. “Your Highness’s health is important. Why not return to Ci’an Palace to rest?”

“No,” she replied. “I’ll rest a bit in the side palace. If the emperor wakes up, alert me promptly.”

After the empress dowager left, Xu Junyuan dismissed the other maids and eunuchs, and Jiang Xing immediately sat up in bed. Now he could finally think about how to comfort Lin Qingyu.

At the moment, he couldn’t speak; he could only write anything he wanted to say. Thus, he jotted down everything he could think of in the

order he thought of it, forgoing logic and even forgetting that Great Yu's writing system didn't use punctuation. He was worried that his handwriting would be too small for Lin Qingyu to understand, so the characters he wrote were large—so large that one sheet of paper could only fit one sentence.

Xu Junyuan had said that Jiang Xing's muteness would be temporary, simply because this body had never attempted speech before and needed to acclimatize to it. If that was true, could he practice making sounds by himself?

The official charged with relaying the message hurried to the general's residence as quickly as he could and explained his visit to Yuan Yin.

"Please wait," Yuan Yin said. "I'll tell the lady now."

Lin Qingyu had returned to the general's residence an hour earlier. He often returned late at night, especially this past year, so Yuan Yin hadn't thought that anything was wrong. He'd welcomed Lin Qingyu home as usual, asking whether he wanted to eat, and Lin Qingyu had nodded.

Nothing about that was unusual.

When Huantong had arrived with food, he'd seen Lin Qingyu calmly looking through the cabinets. "What are you looking for, Young Master?"

"The box." Lin Qingyu's tone was the same as usual. "Where's the box with the rings and letters?"

"Oh. Right here." Huantong thought it seemed like something was wrong, but he didn't have time to think about it further. Still, when he handed the box to Lin Qingyu, a chill crept up his back.

He knew what that weird feeling was about. His young master remembered everything as clear as day. How could he have forgotten where he'd placed such an important item?

Lin Qingyu opened the brocade box, still in his usual calm manner. Finally finding what he was looking for, he let himself smile faintly. "See? He promised me."

"Young Master?" Huantong exclaimed, frightened.

"He promised me," Lin Qingyu said with certainty. "He wouldn't have lied to me."

At that, Huantong only panicked more. “Young Master, what are you talking about?”

Lin Qingyu seemed unable to hear him. Or rather, he seemed to be deliberately avoiding reality and sinking into an illusion. “A dream…only a dream.”

Suddenly, his expression contorted fiercely, though his features were still eerily beautiful. “How dare he lie to me?!”

In addition to the pledge, the box also held the wedding rings that Jiang Xing had given him, as well as every single letter his husband had written him over the past year.

Lin Qingyu picked up the top letter. In it, Jiang Xing whined that he was so hungry that he could never eat his fill, and that he wanted to eat his mother-in-law’s plum-blossom cakes. At the end of the letter, he told Lin Qingyu to eat and sleep well.

Eat well… Jiang Xing wanted him to eat well.

Lin Qingyu walked to the table, picked up a cake, and stuffed it into his mouth. He hadn’t even swallowed it before he shoved another inside.

Huantong hastily tried to stop him. “Young Master!”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes were bloodshot, but he couldn’t produce any more tears. He had cried them all away in the dream.

This scene was the first thing Yuan Yin witnessed upon entering the room. He had seen a lot in his life, but the sight still frightened him. “Lady?”

Lin Qingyu choked down the food in his mouth and swiped his thumb over his lips. “What?” he asked, as if nothing had happened.

Yuan Yin didn’t dare look at him again. He lowered his head. “The palace has summoned you to meet His Majesty. They’ve also sent a letter.”

When he heard the word “letter,” Lin Qingyu swayed, although Huantong held him steady.

What did the palace want to tell him…? Did it have something to do with the war in the northwest?

“Bring it,” Lin Qingyu heard himself say.

The letter was brought to his hand. He suddenly felt nauseous, like he wanted to vomit. He even had the urge to tear the message to shreds. But what if it was from Jiang Xing?

Lin Qingyu trembled as he opened the note.

A familiar line—an unusual phrase that he'd said to himself many times—met his eyes, as did a name—the name that was carved into his heart.

In the course of a flurry of memories, a voice spoke in his head: "We can make a secret code, and if I don't die—if my soul transmigrates into someone else—we can find each other using that code, okay?"

Unusual shock had appeared on Lin Qingyu's face. His eerily calm breathing quickened, as if his lungs were on fire, burning away the last of his logic.

"Lady?" Yuan Yin said worriedly.

"Pr-prepare." Lin Qingyu's eyes were hazy, and he looked dazed and dreamy. "I must go to the palace."

Is it you…?

It has to be. It has to be you… Please, I beg you. It must be.

The carriage could only go as far as the palace gates. Lin Qingyu disembarked so hastily that, for the first time in his life, he tripped over his own clothes.

The palace forbade running, except in emergencies, but he didn't care. Just as he had during last year's Lantern Festival, he pushed his way through the crowd to fall into Jiang Xing's arms.

"Why were you running, Physician Lin?"

"I was coming to see you, so of course I ran to you."

That magnificent palace grew closer and closer.

To a call of "Lord Lin has arrived," he entered the emperor's chambers.

The youth clad in a black-dragon robe looked toward him. His face, originally dim and expressionless, was shining again—his eyes were as bright as stars, revealing endless love and infatuation.

The young emperor’s eyes merged with Jiang Xing’s eyes in the dream. In that moment, Lin Qingyu felt as though someone had pulled him up from the cold, dark depths of a frozen lake.

His gaze met the emperor’s. The youth opened his mouth and said with difficulty, “Qing…yu.”

That was the only thing he knew how to say.

Lin Qingyu stared at him, dazed.

Jiang Xing wanted to say more, but he was unable to produce any other noises. He could only take the papers he’d already written on and hold them up for Lin Qingyu to see:

Qingyu! Qingyu!!! I’m Jiang Xing!!! I’m back again!!!

I’m not a playboy!!! I didn’t sleep with you and then leave forever!!! I missed you a lot…

I really like you.

I love you.

Chapter 104

JIANG XING HAD BEEN WRITING the entire time he was waiting for Lin Qingyu. He'd scrawled quite a bit, and he wanted to show Lin Qingyu every single page. But he was too hasty and inattentive—he accidentally grasped the papers too loosely, and most of them slipped from his hand.

Suddenly, a winter wind blew open the window, and the papers flew all over the room. In the whistling wind, Lin Qingyu looked up at the slowly falling sheets. He seemed to glimpse a familiar figure, seemed to hear people talking to him.

It was Lu Wancheng's figure and Gu Fuzhou's voice. Lin Qingyu also heard the voice of the young man in his dreams. When the wind stopped, those two people vanished, leaving only the youth before his eyes in his world.

That was Jiang Xing.

It was really him.

Lu Wancheng had died, and Gu Fuzhou had died, but Jiang Xing was still alive.

Jiang Xing saw Lin Qingyu laugh, then he saw tears finally fall from his red-rimmed eyes. He stood there, laughing and crying, *still* laughing as tears streamed down his face. Love and hatred swirled around him obsessively, as if he were on the brink of insanity.

Yet Lin Qingyu was still so beautiful. That crazy, stunning man still stole Jiang Xing's soul away with a single glance.

Still, he didn't want to admire that beauty while Lin Qingyu was going crazy. He liked seeing Lin Qingyu poison others, liked watching him do bad things, liked Lin Qingyu's expression when he was underneath Jiang Xing. But what he always liked most was when Lin Qingyu was happy.

Jiang Xing remembered that he'd written quite a bit to comfort Lin Qingyu. After searching through the pages to no avail, he gave up.

Fuck it. Why was he still searching for those words at this point?

Jiang Xing tossed the papers onto the table and began to approach Lin Qingyu, calling his name again. “Qingyu.”

As soon as Jiang Xing moved toward him, Lin Qingyu’s legs gave out, and he collapsed to the floor.

“Qingyu!” Jiang Xing exclaimed, instinctively cradling him.

Lin Qingyu’s body couldn’t handle such intense, almost overwhelming grief and joy at the same time. He couldn’t even reach out to touch Jiang Xing’s face before closing his eyes and fainting in the young man’s arms.

Jiang Xing paled. He tried to call out, but he hadn’t practiced long enough—and right now, he could still only say Lin Qingyu’s name, nothing else. He set Lin Qingyu on the bed, breaking a vase in the process.

Xu Junyuan was outside, guarding the door; hearing the commotion, he walked in. When he saw Lin Qingyu lying on the bed, his eyes closed tight, he didn’t even wait for Jiang Xing to write anything. “I’ll summon the imperial physician.”

The imperial physician’s arrival startled the empress dowager too. She thought that something had happened to the emperor; she didn’t expect that it was Lin Qingyu who’d fainted in the emperor’s chambers. And when she saw that her son had allowed Lin Qingyu to lie on his royal bed, and was guarding him, she felt as though something was off.

That was the emperor’s royal bed. On top of the fact that Lin Qingyu didn’t belong to the royal family, he was still the wife of Gu Fuzhou. So this…was a bit inappropriate.

“His Majesty truly likes Qingyu more than most,” she said quietly.

“Lord Lin is gorgeous, and he treats His Majesty like a little brother. Of course His Majesty likes him,” Auntie Xiujiao said.

If Lin Qingyu only treated him like a brother, that was fine. Except…

Xu Junyuan’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Imperial Physician Chu, how is Lord Lin?”

“Fine for now. But his inner body is overheated, and his pulse is rapid but weak. His heart brought this attack on,” Chu Zhengde reported. “Has

Lord Lin been through a series of events inducing first intense grief, then joy?”

“That, I have no way of knowing,” Xu Junyuan replied slowly.

It had been much more than just grief and joy.

Jiang Xing once again realized what he’d done to Lin Qingyu. He himself had gone through the same intense emotions within two hours, and he’d barely made it through, although he was at least still conscious.

But Lin Qingyu couldn’t stand it. Perhaps the one left behind was the one who hurt the most.

Jiang Xing put himself in Lin Qingyu’s shoes; if he’d received news of Lin Qingyu’s death and revival back-to-back on the same day, he would probably either die or go crazy. He might not even last until he heard the good news.

His darling was already really awesome and strong. Much more so than Jiang Xing himself, at least.

“I shall prescribe Lord Lin some calming medications,” Chu Zhengde said. “When he wakes, he must rest peacefully for a time and make sure that he doesn’t undergo such strong emotions again.”

The empress dowager frowned. The emperor had just ascended and was waiting for Lin Qingyu to settle the court and take charge. Since Lin Qingyu had fallen ill at a very inopportune time, she could only work a bit harder. “Laifu, clear out the side chambers of Xingqing Palace for Lord Lin to live in temporarily. When he wakes, escort him back to the general’s residence.”

From his place sitting on the bed, Jiang Xing reached out and silently tucked Lin Qingyu in.

The empress dowager noticed his actions. “Your Majesty wants Lord Lin to remain?”

Jiang Xing nodded.

It was the empress dowager’s first time receiving a response from her son. She was overjoyed. “Did you see that? The emperor…the emperor was speaking to me!”

Auntie Xiujiao nodded; she could hardly hold back tears. “Yes, this humble servant saw. His Majesty is truly recovering.”

Xu Junyuan smiled. “Since His Majesty enjoys being with Lord Lin, why doesn’t Lord Lin stay with him? Perhaps His Majesty will recover quickly that way.”

The empress dowager was almost crying with happiness. “Yes, yes—Lord Lin shall reside temporarily in Xingqing Palace.”

She knew very well that that was against the rules, and that if other officials found out, they’d kick up a fuss again. But the reality was that her Li-er wasn’t fully cognizant of anything and only reacted to Lin Qingyu. She wanted nothing in the world more than for his soul to recover, for him to learn to speak and call her “Royal Mother.”

Lin Qingyu slept for an entire day. A number of maids stood by to care for him, so Jiang Xing couldn’t do much. Finally, after everyone else left, Jiang Xing touched Lin Qingyu’s hands and face. Soon, he became dissatisfied with that, and embraced Lin Qingyu through his quilt. After a while, he grew dissatisfied again.

Lin Qingyu seemed cold. His eyebrows were furrowed, even in sleep.

When Auntie Xiujiao brought his medicine, she saw Jiang Xing flip down the cover on the bed; he was about to climb in.

She quickly stopped him. “Your Majesty, you may not understand now, but Lord Lin has a husband,” she explained patiently. “He’s married to Great General Gu, who’s away fighting a war in the northwest. You can hold his hand, but you certainly can’t sleep in the same bed as him.”

Jiang Xing wanted to scoff.

When Lin Qingyu woke up, he stared into space for a long time before he recognized the person in front of him.

The youth clad in dragon robes and a jade headdress let out a breath of relief. “Qingyu.” Jiang Xing had practiced the entire day, and he could finally say Lin Qingyu’s name without pausing.

The rest of what he wanted to say, he could only write down. *You’re awake.*

Lin Qingyu looked confused. *Xiao Li?* No, it was…

Lin Qingyu's memories slowly came back to him, and he suddenly sat up and grabbed the youth. "Who…are you?"

His voice was so hoarse that he could hardly make a sound.

Jiang Xing let Lin Qingyu grab him tightly, mouthing, *It's me, darling. Jiang Xing.*

As if Lin Qingyu had remembered something incredibly terrifying, his grip only tightened more; his eyes hurt from the effort. "Gu Fuzhou died…" His lips trembled. "He died."

Jiang Xing lowered his eyes. Opening his palm, he wrote, *I'm sorry*.

As he finished, Lin Qingyu's tears fell. "Jiang Xing lied to me… He said that was only a dream. But he knew that I could only see his true form when his soul entered the dream. *You* knew…"

Jiang Xing had nothing to say. He had known, but he'd still gone. He'd only wanted to see Lin Qingyu again before he had to leave.

"Jiang Xing wrote me a pledge." Lin Qingyu's words were jumbled and ineloquent, no longer calm and concise as usual. "He said he'd come back. He promised he'd be fine. I didn't go anywhere—I just waited for you… You promised me, Jiang Xing. If you'd really died…"

Jiang Xing's heart nearly shattered. Beyond Lin Qingyu's name, though, he couldn't say a single word. Even if he could speak, what could he say? That he hadn't wanted to die—that he'd tried his best to live?

What use was it? In the end, he hadn't accomplished it.

Jiang Xing closed his eyes, forcing himself to forget how Gu Fuzhou had died. He recalled that Imperial Physician Chu had told him that Lin Qingyu shouldn't experience such intense emotions again, and he hugged Lin Qingyu to his chest, stroking his long hair.

As Jiang Xing comforted Lin Qingyu, his body eventually stopped trembling. Just when Jiang Xing finally thought that he'd calmed down, Lin Qingyu suddenly froze and raised his head. "Are you Xiao Li or Jiang Xing?"

Jiang Xing, Jiang Xing wrote patiently.

Lin Qingyu pressed his ear against Jiang Xing's chest, listening to his heartbeat with a tragic smile. "Jiang Xing… Why do you torture me so? Just because I like you? Because you know that, no matter what, I won't go looking for death?"

Jiang Xing swallowed, a mist of sorrow obscuring the light in his eyes.

"But even I can't take it," Lin Qingyu murmured, as if in a trance. "I can't take it…"

Jiang Xing kissed him. He kissed his forehead, his eyes, his lips. When their lips touched, Lin Qingyu slowly closed his eyes.

Jiang Xing's kiss was tearful too. When they separated, Lin Qingyu saw the dampness of his eyelashes.

Lin Qingyu wanted to cry again. Although he hated his tearful, emotional side, he couldn't help it. He could only press himself into Jiang Xing's arms, move even closer to him, eyes full of fear.

Jiang Xing embraced him and wrote soothing words.

Xu Junyuan said that my muteness is temporary. I just have to get used to speaking.

Sigh. This body hasn't got abs…again.

My tongue is bigger now, though. What do you think, darling? Is it better kissing me or Gu Fuzhou?

"How did you… How did Gu Fuzhou die?" Lin Qingyu asked suddenly.

Jiang Xing's reply was very simple. *In battle. But we won that battle in the end.*

Lin Qingyu froze. "Did it hurt?" he asked softly.

Not at all. I died quickly. I didn't feel anything, not even pain, before I was gone.

Great Yu used traditional characters, which were too complicated to write. Once Lin Qingyu recovered, Jiang Xing had to find time to teach him to read simplified characters.

The vulnerable Lin Qingyu was extremely easy to placate. He'd believe anything Jiang Xing told him. "That's good." He was reacting a lot more slowly now, and only after a long time did he ask, "Then…why did you wake up in Xiao Li's body?"

Jiang Xing saw that he'd used all the ink in his inkstone and wanted to get another. As soon as he moved, though, Lin Qingyu panicked as if the world were ending, widening his eyes. "Where are you going?"

Jiang Xing smiled and pointed at the inkstone.

Lin Qingyu understood what he meant, but he nevertheless asked, "When will you come back?"

Jiang Xing stayed there, hugging Lin Qingyu even closer.

Lin Qingyu slowly lowered his head. After a silence, he said, "Jiang Xing, am I acting strangely right now?" He looked at his hands and helplessly continued, "I'm sorry. I don't want to be like this either. But I…I can't control it."

He didn't want to act the way he was now, but he didn't know how to deal with losing Jiang Xing—not even for an hour.

With the remaining ink, Jiang Xing wrote: *Don't control it. I'm begging you, cling to me more.*

Chapter 105

ONLY ONE DAY HAD PASSED, but Lin Qingyu seemed like a completely different person. Who would've guessed that the official in power just a short amount of time ago—the person who'd led the new emperor to his throne—was currently curled up in said emperor's arms, his face pale and his hair blocking his eyes, so they looked like a pair of nesting birds?

Jiang Xing could tell that Lin Qingyu was striving to recover, but he'd been through such a huge shock that recovering just like that wasn't realistic. Jiang Xing could only be with him around the clock, patiently reassuring him and helping him gradually walk out of the shadows.

As the only other person aware of Jiang Xing's identity, Xu Junyuan was forced to stay in the palace as well, if only to create opportunities for the couple to interact in private. He became the pair's watchman; Jiang Xing was treating the revered imperial preceptor like a mere servant.

But there was no help for it. If anyone else saw that Great General Gu's wife was spending all his time in bed with the new emperor, there would certainly have been a storm of complaints.

After taking medicine for two days, and with Jiang Xing keeping him company, Lin Qingyu was intermittently back to his normal calm self. But sometimes, he was still confused, not knowing whether he was still dreaming or in reality. When he listened to others talk, he felt as though there was something between him and them, as if the speaker were underwater.

Lin Qingyu knew that these were side effects of the calming medication. The more medicine he drank, the more he slept, and the more he slept, the more he dreamed.

After recovering, Lin Qingyu told Jiang Xing what he'd missed during his time in the northwest. He told him how he'd moved against Xi Rong and Xiao Jie, then how he'd helped Xiao Li take the throne. He spoke

clearly and slowly, but as he reached the part about the change in Xi Rong's loyalties, he looked confused. "What…was I just talking about?"

You received a coded message from Western Xia spies, Jiang Xing wrote patiently.

"Then I went to the palace," Lin Qingyu said, nodding.

Is Xi Rong dead yet?

He shook his head. "I wanted to keep him alive for the time being, then sacrifice him to the heavens when you came back victorious."

No. Jiang Xing's eyes were a bit cold. *I don't need him tainting my victory.*

Lin Qingyu paused, then made to get out of bed. "Then I'll take his life now to avoid that."

Although Jiang Xing's chest hurt, he smiled. "Darling," he called. Burning the paper of words he'd already written, he laid out a new sheet. *Let's ignore him for now and talk about more important things.*

Lin Qingyu looked at him seriously. "Which ones?"

Even if it was in a dream, Qingyu, we consummated our marriage. How about we reminisce about that? What do you think?

After writing that, he awaited Lin Qingyu's reply with nervousness and anticipation. He nearly started to spin his brush, but he forced himself to stop so that he wouldn't annoy Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu thought for a while, then said, "It…hurt."

Jiang Xing didn't know how to react.

"But since it was with you, it was good." Lin Qingyu smiled.

Jiang Xing smiled as well. *I thought it was good too,* he scribbled in his wild handwriting. *It was so magical. I liked it a lot.*

When Lin Qingyu looked at the "dirty talk" on the paper, his cheeks flushed red. He didn't know that Jiang Xing's face was also burning. After all, Jiang Xing was only a teenager; writing these dirty thoughts made him shy and nervous too.

Unfortunately, Jiang Xing and Lin Qingyu had made love in despair. However good they'd felt as they did so, it had also seemed shrouded in unremitting sorrow.

But it was okay. Jiang Xing believed that they could move past that.

Lin Qingyu took his paper. "We can't let other people see this," he said quietly.

He was about to ignite the paper when Jiang Xing grabbed his wrist and leaned in.

He was going to kiss Lin Qingyu, who saw his reflection in Xiao Li's eyes.

Lin Qingyu wanted to close his eyes, like he had last time, but it was already too late. His body stiffened uncontrollably, and he tilted his face to dodge the kiss.

Jiang Xing let go, feeling hurt, and slowly drew a question mark, then added, *No kiss?*

Calming himself, Lin Qingyu said a bit defeatedly, "I can't tell the difference… No, that's not it. I just don't think I'm used to your current body."

Huh? But this body is the most similar to my original one.

"I know." Lin Qingyu felt a bit frustrated. "It's just that I knew Xiao Li."

Before Jiang Xing had become Lu Wancheng or Gu Fuzhou, Lin Qingyu had never seen either man. He could easily accept Jiang Xing taking on their appearances. He'd known Xiao Li, though. Not only that, he'd spent time with Xiao Li often over this past year. Xiao Li had smiled at him, and he'd fed Xiao Li and personally placed the emperor's beaded hat on his head. To him, Xiao Li had been a real, existing person.

Jiang Xing knew what Lin Qingyu wanted to say. *Xu Junyuan said that my soul "returned" to Xiao Li's body, so you can think of me and him as the same person. For some reason, my soul was wandering outside—that's why Xiao Li was intellectually incomplete. Now that I'm back, Xiao Li has recovered, because we were always the same person.*

Lin Qingyu looked at him. "Now that you're back, you'll stay, right?"

Of course.

Seeing him agree so confidently, Lin Qingyu tamped down his anxiety. He smiled a bit. “I’ll try my best to get used to it, then. Kiss me again. I won’t shy away this time.”

Jiang Xing smiled and pressed a light kiss to the corner of Lin Qingyu’s lips, but his eyes had dimmed.

Although Lin Qingyu said that he couldn’t control his own emotions, he was still trying his best to do so. But he didn’t know that Jiang Xing hurt more when looking at the quiet beauty who didn’t make a scene than the one who lost control of his emotions.

After resting for three days, Lin Qingyu appeared to be back to normal. During those days, the empress dowager had overseen the court alone from behind a curtain, which exhausted her. When she found out that Lin Qingyu had mostly recovered already, she visited him. “Qingyu, you have to hurry up and get better,” she hinted. “There are countless decisions you need to make.”

Lin Qingyu forced himself to appear normal in front of his outside visitor. “Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty.”

The empress dowager sighed. “There’s still no news from the northwest. No one knows how Gu Fuzhou’s battle for Yongliang went.”

Lin Qingyu froze, his breaths quickening. In his current state, how could he stand to hear about such a thing?

To prevent the empress dowager from continuing, Jiang Xing opened his mouth: “Mother.”

She immediately froze, thinking that she’d heard wrong. “Li-er…?”

“Mother,” Jiang Xing said again.

“The emperor spoke?” The empress dowager was so excited that tears streamed down her face, and she no longer looked as graceful and collected as usual. “He called me ‘Mother’!”

Auntie Xiujiao was choked up too. “That was the first word that His Majesty ever said. He called you ‘Mother.’ His Majesty cares about you as much as one would expect!”

No longer able to bear it, the empress dowager cried against Jiang Xing's shoulder. "Li-er, you're finally recovering… Mother has finally, finally seen this day."

Jiang Xing couldn't pretend to be dumb for his entire life. Still, he also couldn't become normal overnight. This process would require a lot of time. Today, he could say 'Mother'; next year, he'd be able to recite poems; three or five years down the line, he might even be capable of some mathematics.

But I think it'll be okay to keep pretending to be slow-witted, Jiang Xing had written to Lin Qingyu. *I'm too lazy to talk to anyone but you anyway.*

Jiang Xing's one word made the empress dowager weep until she was breathless. She didn't even go to court the next day, leaving only Lin Qingyu to listen from behind the curtain. Lin Qingyu changed into his official clothes, then sat in front of the mirror, looking expressionlessly at his reflection. Out of nowhere, annoyance and disgust surged in his chest.

He immediately closed his eyes before Jiang Xing could notice anything off. *Stop brooding. Jiang Xing is already back. If you keep crying and living in fear, how will you be different from Xiao Jie? Do you want to become someone you despise?*

But was Jiang Xing truly back? Was Lin Qingyu dreaming again? When the dream ended, would Jiang Xing leave again too?

Lin Qingyu opened his eyes, watching the reflection of the emperor, who stood behind him, adjust Lin Qingyu's hat. Was he Gu Fuzhou, Xiao Li…or Jiang Xing?

Was he dreaming again?

Lin Qingyu surreptitiously picked up a hairpin on the table, then stabbed the sharp end into his palm.

Ouch.… It was real. It wasn't a dream.

Before Lin Qingyu could let out a sigh of relief, Jiang Xing snatched the hairpin away. "Qingyu?"

Lin Qingyu paused. "Your Majesty."

Jiang Xing’s eyebrows furrowed. Then his face relaxed into a smile. “I’m Jiang Xing. Don’t f-forget.”

After many days of practice, his body had gradually learned how to speak, and he could now say some simple sentences.

Lin Qingyu smiled too. “I remember. But since Jiang Xing is emperor now, I’m not wrong to call you ‘Your Majesty.’”

Jiang Xing lowered his head, checking the wound on Lin Qingyu’s palm. Thankfully, he’d noticed what Lin Qingyu was doing just in time; the skin was only broken, not bleeding.

“It’s fine,” Lin Qingyu said nonchalantly. “Just put some ointment on it.”

Lin Qingyu called Xiaosongzi to bring his medicine chest, then calmly dressed the wound. Jiang Xing watched him thoughtfully, not even offering help. Suddenly, Jiang Xing removed the jade headdress from his hair, picked up the scissors nearby, and cut off his long hair without hesitation.

Strand upon strand of dark hair fell to the floor. A moment later, the youth sported short hair.

Lin Qingyu sat in shock for a while. “Jiang Xing…?”

Jiang Xing smiled. “I’m here, darling. I’m Jiang Xing.”

“You…” Lin Qingyu didn’t know what to say. “Why did you do this to yourself?”

Jiang Xing had cut his hair messily and choppily. It was so uneven, it was as if a dog had bitten chunks off at random. Thankfully, Jiang Xing’s handsome face was still undeniably beautiful, even when he had such an awful haircut.

He now looked exactly like the Jiang Xing in Lin Qingyu’s dream.

Lin Qingyu had watched in person as the long-haired “Xiao Li” become the short-haired Jiang Xing.

He still remembered the sensation of Jiang Xing’s short hair brushing his eyelashes.

Jiang Xing tried his best to speak, but forgot how to pronounce one word. He could only resort to holding up a written note: *I look cooler like this.*

Lin Qingyu had felt for several days as though he was in a trance, but now Jiang Xing's return finally became real to him, and the sounds by his ears finally became distinct.

Jiang Xing knelt in front of Lin Qingyu, looking up at him. "Qingyu…it's me…Jiang Xing."

Lin Qingyu couldn't help reaching out to hold Jiang Xing's face. "You're Jiang Xing," he sighed in relief and trust. "You're really back."

"I've…been back…many days," Jiang Xing said with difficulty.

The fog disappeared from Lin Qingyu's eyes, which became clear again. Suddenly, Lin Qingyu gripped Jiang Xing's chin tightly in his hand, eyes sharp. "The nerve you have to come back!"

Lin Qinyu wasn't hurting Jiang Xing's chin at all, but Jiang Xing furrowed his eyebrows anyway. "Not so hard, darling."

Just then, Xiaosongzi said from the outside, "Lord Lin. Lord Li and the others are waiting in Qinzheng Hall to discuss things with you."

Lin Qingyu's eyes darkened. He looked around, then tore a strip of fabric from the curtains.

"Here." Jiang Xing obediently and excitedly held out his hands.

Lin Qingyu bound his wrists together. "Go to bed and wait for me under the covers. Until I come back, you're not allowed to go anywhere."

Is this really happening to me?

Jiang Xing nodded happily.

Chapter 106

IN FRONT OF THE DOOR, Lin Qingyu hesitated. This was his first time stepping into Qinzheng Hall in many days.

"Lord Lin, is something wrong?" Xiaosongzi asked.

"No." Lin Qingyu drew himself up. "Let's go inside."

As soon as he entered Qinzheng Hall, the officials drinking tea all stood to greet him. Even those of higher rank greeted him as an equal. Lin Qingyu returned all their greetings, then began by asking the minister of the Court of Judicial Review, "How goes the investigation into the Western Xia spies?"

Xiaosongzi brought Lin Qingyu tea; when he saw Lin Qingyu discussing court matters coolly and calmly, his heart finally calmed. Lord Lin had frightened him over these past few days, and he couldn't imagine how intense Lord Lin's grief and joy must have been to push him to the point of illness. Thankfully, he'd still made it through.

Since Lin Qingyu had missed a few days' worth of court meetings, he had much more to discuss than usual today. At first, he had the patience to listen to the officials speak, but the longer the discussion continued, the more distracted he grew. He often looked toward the door, as if eager to confirm something.

Two hours later, Lin Qingyu gave in to his restlessness. "That will be all for today. We'll continue discussing things tomorrow."

At that point, almost everyone left, but Li Chan stayed behind. Lin Qingyu could tell that he was dallying deliberately because he had something to say in private. "Lord Li?"

"Lord Lin… His Majesty has just taken the throne, and the position of prime minister is still empty. Thus, the officials have no one to lead them. Please excuse my insolence, but why don't you take the position, Lord Lin?" Li Chan asked. "That way, the imperial censors won't be able to speak ill of you in private, claiming that it's unbecoming and disgraceful

that you manage courtly matters beyond your rank—that you're power-hungry and wish to control the emperor."

"It isn't the first time they've talked about me," Lin Qingyu said absently. "Let them talk. In any case, they don't have the courage to voice those criticisms to my face."

"But…" Li Chan hesitated.

"It isn't an urgent matter. And, when the time is right, I have my own plans."

Li Chan looked at him for a long time before mentioning more private matters. "This lowly official heard that you were ill recently, Lord Lin. Are you…all right?"

"I'm fine," Lin Qingyu said politely. "You needn't worry about me, Lord Li."

Hearing the distance in Lin Qingyu's voice, Li Chan forced a smile. "Good. Now I can cease my worrying."

Lin Qingyu strode quickly back to Xingqing Palace. There, he asked the eunuch standing guard in front of the bedchamber, "Is the emperor still inside?"

"Yes. An hour ago, the empress dowager came to check on His Majesty. He was sleeping, so she left after a glance."

Lin Qingyu walked inside. He didn't see Jiang Xing on the bed—just a bump under the covers.

Jiang Xing probably heard Lin Qingyu's footsteps, since he stuck his head out. His messy short hair was flattened from having been covered for so long. He looked sleepy, but handsome regardless.

Jiang Xing yawned, his hands still bound. "I waited…for so long."

Xiao Li could never have acted like this. In the entire world, only Jiang Xing could have been lazy enough to annoy Lin Qingyu, yet still have the power to make Lin Qingyu willingly indulge him.

Lin Qingyu's shoulders dropped subtly. "You were waiting for me?"

"Yeah," Jiang Xing said. "Hungry."

Jiang Xing's inability to speak fluently was a bit cute. Lin Qingyu smiled slightly. "What do you want to eat?"

Jiang Xing frowned, thinking. Then he opened Lin Qingyu's palm and wrote *plum blossom*.

"We only have the kind that the kitchens make—none of my mother's. Will that be all right?"

Jiang Xing thought seriously about that. "F-fine," he concluded. Then he raised his hands, motioning for Lin Qingyu to help him untie the knot.

"No." Having refused the request, Lin Qingyu spoke through the door to ask the maids to prepare food. Then he sat down on the bed. "Answer me—how did Gu Fuzhou die?"

He'd asked this question before, but at that time, he wasn't in his right mind; it had been easy for Jiang Xing to pull the wool over his eyes. After he'd calmed down, Lin Qingyu realized that what Jiang Xing had promised was impossible. If he'd just stayed in Great Yu's camp, planning the battle without fighting himself, then how could Gu Fuzhou have died in battle when Yongliang was retaken?

Jiang Xing froze, then lowered his hands with a sigh. "Classic Qingyu… Mean."

Lin Qingyu had accidentally tied the knot too tightly before he left; he hadn't been able to control himself. And Jiang Xing's current body was less hardy than Gu Fuzhou's, since the emperor had been spoiled as a prince. Thus, there was already a red mark on his wrists, though only two hours had passed.

Lin Qingyu rubbed the faint marks. "Tell me the truth and I'll release you."

"Too long. Don't know how."

Lin Qingyu brought paper and a brush; after that, he untied the knot. "Write it, then."

Jiang Xing knew that he wasn't going to get away with this. Even if he refused to write the truth now, Lin Qingyu would still find out once news arrived from the northwest.

He took the brush. Lin Qingyu had thought that he'd move to the table to write, but he lay face down on the bed and pulled the covers over himself, just like a student who slacked off during the day but secretly made an effort at night.

As soon as Jiang Xing stopped writing, Lin Qingyu took the paper from him. He scanned each line quickly, brow furrowing, expression as cold as ice. Jiang Xing had the sudden feeling that his teacher was checking his homework.

"Using yourself as bait…" Lin Qingyu laughed coldly. "You didn't take your promise to me seriously at all, Jiang-gongzi."

Jiang Xing laughed briefly—a self-deprecating sound. "Unfair."

"If you did, how could you have let yourself get into such a dangerous situation?"

Jiang Xing had no explanation. Recalling those events, he also felt as though he'd acted much too noble. Now, he might not have done so. But at that time, he'd stayed in the northwest for a year and personally witnessed thousands of his brethren die outside of Yongliang's walls. His emotions had gotten to him.

It was no use explaining that to Lin Qingyu, though, so he decided to solve the problem in the simplest way possible. He knelt on the ground, clasped his hands, and yelled, "I was wrong! Next time, I won't!"

Lin Qingyu was unmoved. "When you made your promise, I believed you," he said coldly. "And then?"

Jiang Xing had nothing to say in response.

Lin Qingyu laughed softly. "I won't believe you anymore. I'll only believe myself."

He wouldn't let Jiang Xing leave his control, and he certainly wouldn't let Jiang Xing go anywhere that Lin Qingyu himself couldn't go. He'd had enough of that feeling.

Jiang Xing smiled. *Physician Lin needs to protect me well, then,* he wrote. *Don't let me go to war again. It was scary.*

Lin Qingyu fell still. "When that happened…were you very frightened?"

“Not really,” Jiang Xing said in a casual tone. He pulled down the brocade covers, inviting Lin Qingyu into bed. “Get in. Sit.”

Lin Qingyu hesitated, then crawled in, the familiar aura enveloping him.

When he’d interacted with Xiao Li before, he had never felt this presence. This was Jiang Xing’s aura. Whether he was Lu Wancheng, Gu Fuzhou, or Xiao Li, the feeling that Jiang Xing gave him never changed.

Soon, Xiaosongzi brought a plate of plum-blossom cakes. Seeing the emperor’s newly short hair shocked him greatly. “Y-Your Majesty’s hair…”

“His Majesty got carried away playing and accidentally cut off his hair,” Lin Qingyu said. “It’s not a big deal. No need to be so shocked.”

Jiang Xing looked into the mirror. Not even he could bear to look at his hair, so he picked up the scissors and fixed it up a bit until it didn’t look too scary. Looking at the short-haired youth reflected in the mirror, he couldn’t help trying to explain, “I feel…I’m myself again.”

Short hair truly looked much tidier, and it was easier to deal with. Lin Qingyu wanted to try it as well if he had a chance.

“Look up,” he said.

Confused, Jiang Xing did so.

Lin Qingyu touched his throat. “In the dream, you had a mole here too.”

Jiang Xing was perplexed. *You don’t remember what I looked like in the dream. Why would you remember that mole?* he wrote.

“Because, from my angle, I’m always looking at that spot.”

Thinking deeply about these words, Jiang Xing smiled and propped his hand on his chin. “Hm? Don’t understand.”

Lin Qingyu glanced at him. “You’re still young, Your Majesty. You’ll understand once you grow up.”

***

Ever since Jiang Xing had begun to speak, the empress dowager had cared much less about court. Instead, she mostly focused on Jiang Xing. She would spend half of each day in Xingqing Palace, personally teaching Jiang Xing to speak, as if he really were a babbling infant.

“Li-er, you’re the emperor. You must refer to yourself using the royal ‘we,’” she said. “Come, say after Mother. ‘We.’”

Jiang Xing looked helplessly at Lin Qingyu, hoping that he could help shoo the empress dowager away. But Lin Qingyu calmly flipped open a memorial, seeming not to see him.

Observing no response, the empress dowager doubled down. “Li-er, say ‘we,’” she insisted.

Jiang Xing could only say it with her. The empress dowager was immediately ecstatic. “Amazing, Li-er. You’re so smart!” She acted as though Jiang Xing had just composed an epic poem that no one could surpass. “Don’t you think so, Qingyu?”

Lin Qingyu reacted neutrally. “Mm.”

The empress dowager noticed that he was busy working. “Qingyu, if you’re reading memorials, why not go to Qinzheng Hall?” she asked curiously.

Lin Qingyu stiffened slightly. “I…”

He knew it was against the rules, but he had to keep Jiang Xing within his field of vision.

“Mother,” Jiang Xing interjected. “We…want him here.”

So long as her son was speaking, the empress dowager had no limits. “Fine, fine. Qingyu will stay with you.” She paused, then added, “But after General Gu returns, you can’t cling to Qingyu like this, all right?”

Just after she’d mentioned Gu Fuzhou, Xiaosongzi ran in, panting. “Your Majesties, Lord Lin, the messenger from the northwest is here!”

“Hurry—usher him in!” the empress dowager responded quickly.

Jiang Xing looked toward Lin Qingyu. He seemed calm, but he gripped the memorial so tightly that his fingertips turned white.

It was good that Lin Qingyu already knew. He really didn't want to imagine how crazy Lin Qingyu would have gone if he'd found out through another person.

Jiang Xing discreetly tugged Lin Qingyu's sleeve. *Qingyu,* he mouthed.

Lin Qingyu shook his head, indicating that he was fine.

Soon, Shen Huaishi walked in.

The last time Lin Qingyu had seen him was the previous year. Since then, Shen Huaishi had grown thin and tan, and he looked exhausted, his eyes completely bloodshot. It was evident that he'd barely slept on his long journey.

He knelt in front of them and said hoarsely, "The battle is won. Great Yu has reclaimed Yongliang."

The empress dowager let out a long sigh of relief, then smiled. "Gu Fuzhou didn't disappoint us. As soon as the emperor ascended, the great general brought peace to the northwest—as we expected of him. Qingyu, you married a good husband."

"If the battle is won, then why are you not happy?" Lin Qingyu asked Shen Huaishi.

Shen Huaishi raised his head to look at Lin Qingyu. "Imperial Physician Lin, I failed you. Great General Gu…" His voice choked, he pressed his forehead against the ground and sobbed, "Great General Gu… died in battle!"

The empress dowager's eyes immediately widened, and she fell into her chair. The maids covered their mouths with their hands, screaming silently. Xiaosongzi burst into tears, having admired the great general for a long time. His sobs echoed in the hall.

Lin Qingyu glanced at Jiang Xing, whose expression was complicated. "I see."

Shen Huaishi looked up in confusion.

Chapter 107

GU FUZHOU HAD DONE everything he could to marry Lin Qingyu, despite Lu Wancheng having died less than a year ago at that point, and despite all the potential misfortune a male wife was rumored to bring. After their wedding, the couple lived in complete harmony and got along swimmingly. The eunuchs and maids had often witnessed Gu Fuzhou going to the Department of Imperial Physicians to pick up his wife. Sometimes, Lin Qingyu also waited outside the palace for his husband. They had such a good relationship!

But now that Lin Qingyu heard the devastating news that Gu Fuzhou had died in battle, he didn't shed a single tear, even as Xiaosongzi wept. He only said, "I see."

Everyone else—besides Jiang Xing—was immersed in sorrow. When they heard Lin Qingyu say that, no one knew what to think. Their eyes widened again—especially Shen Huaishi's.

On Lin Qingyu's orders, Shen Huaishi had followed Gu Fuzhou to the northwest to protect him. He'd stayed by the great general's side for an entire year, and he knew how deeply Gu Fuzhou loved Lin Qingyu. He'd thought that Lin Qingyu would break down and lose all hope; he'd even been ready to die to atone for his failure. He hadn't expected Lin Qingyu to react like this.

Jiang Xing sighed as he looked at Shen Huaishi's forehead, which was bleeding from his repeated prostrations, and at everyone else's baffled expressions. Lin Qingyu had already broken down once, and he'd nearly lost himself. He knew that he should put on an act now, of course, but he didn't have the energy even for that. He could only do what he always did and hide the truth under his calm exterior. Lin Qingyu never showed his vulnerable side to others. Jiang Xing was the only exception.

In the end, the empress dowager broke the strange silence. "General Gu is extremely skilled in combat, and he's the leader of the army. How is it possible that we won Yongliang but lost him?!"

Regaining his sense, Shen Huaishi said in a low voice, “Yongliang had strong defenses we couldn’t break through. To minimize our losses, Great General Gu…used himself as bait to lure the enemy from the town.”

Now everyone in the room began to cry, moved by his words; the sound of weeping was unending. Xiaosongzi hiccupped between sobs, nearly fainting from lack of air.

“General Wu Youyuan stationed soldiers for an ambush. They were supposed to form a pincer formation with Great General Gu’s forces to trap the enemy. But…” Shen Huaishi closed his eyes briefly, then continued, “But an avalanche trapped General Wu’s men outside the valley. Great General Gu couldn’t hold out until they arrived, and he was—”

A quiet cough interrupted Shen Huaishi. Jiang Xing tugged the empress dowager’s sleeve and said, “Mother, hungry.”

“Xiujiao, take His Majesty to have some dessert,” the empress dowager ordered in a raspy voice.

Auntie Xiujiao wiped the tears from her face. She was about to take Jiang Xing away when he said, “Want to eat here. With Mother.”

The empress dowager smiled through her tears. “You know now to be filial to your mother…” she observed, immediately comforted. “Great General Gu was the pillar of the army. He was loyal to and loved Great Yu. His death means that we’ve lost a great man. You’re also sad for General Gu, right, Your Majesty?”

Jiang Xing’s intentions were glaring, and Lin Qingyu temporarily conceded to him, glossing over Gu Fuzhou’s death itself. “Where is the great general’s body now?” he asked.

Shen Huaishi looked up at Lin Qingyu in a daze. After a long time, he replied, “Three days after I left, General Shi Pei personally accompanied the great general’s body back to the capital. General Wu has stayed in Yongliang and is awaiting orders.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “I will personally see to the general’s funeral.”

“Qingyu,” the empress dowager couldn’t help saying. “If you feel sorrow, don’t hold it in. Be careful of your health.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She sighed. “Go now. Head to the Ministry of Rites and see to the final proceedings for General Gu.”

Lin Qingyu looked at Jiang Xing. “This lowly official…won’t go,” he said quietly. He wanted to stay with Jiang Xing.

When Jiang Xing heard this, his lips curled up slightly. Lin Qingyu was so clingy, and he loved it so much.

The empress dowager thought she’d misheard him. “What?”

“I’ll summon the minister of rites to Xingqing Palace,” Lin Qingyu said. “Huaishi, your journey has exhausted you. Xiaosongzi, take Shen-gongzi to the side palace to wash and change. I have things to ask him later.”

After the empress dowager finally went back to Ci’an Palace, Lin Qingyu dismissed everyone else as well. “Why didn’t you let Shen Huaishi continue speaking just now?” he asked.

Jiang Xing smiled. “Not why you think.” These days, he spoke more and more fluently in front of Lin Qingyu. “I was actually hungry just now.”

Lin Qingyu looked at him accusingly. “You’re lying again.”

“What did you want to hear from Shen Huaishi? How I died? I already told you,” Jiang Xing said, resigned.

“In that case, why can’t I hear it again from Shen Huaishi?”

For a moment, Jiang Xing didn’t know what to say. But when he saw that Lin Qingyu was truly adamant, he suddenly smiled. “Shen Huaishi’s so bad with words. He couldn’t describe just how horribly I died. Here—I’ll act it out for you.”

Lin Qingyu frowned. “What are you up to now?”

“You be Shen Huaishi, and I’ll be Gu Fuzhou.” As he spoke, Jiang Xing’s face fell. He clutched his chest, perfectly imitating his state after being struck by those arrows. With a grunt, he fell toward Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu caught him instinctively, and the two knelt to the ground. Jiang Xing lay in Lin Qingyu’s arms, grasping his hand, and said with difficulty, “Save me… I wrote him a pledge. He’s still waiting. I can’t lie to him…”

Lin Qingyu paused.

All Jiang Xing had thought about before dying was his promise. Lin Qingyu should've been weeping, beyond touched. And he *was* touched, it was true…but why did he also want to laugh?

Jiang Xing stared at Lin Qingyu, emotion pooling in his eyes. "Don't let me die. He'll cry."

Lin Qingyu was speechless.

"I beg you, save me. You must save me… Ah." With that, Jiang Xing let go and fell limply into Lin Qingyu's arms, his eyes wide open and his body still.

"What then?" Lin Qingyu asked, seeing that Jiang Xing had stopped moving.

"Then I died." Even after he'd finished his act, Jiang Xing didn't get up, taking the opportunity to lounge lazily in his wife's arms. "All that was true. If you don't believe me, go ask Shen Huaishi."

Lin Qingyu finally laughed. "I believe you."

"Then why don't you look touched at all?" Jiang Xing stared at him. "Your eyes aren't even teary. This is too mean."

"I truly don't want to cry," Lin Qingyu admitted.

Jiang Xing had achieved his goal, but he pretended to complain. "No way, Qingyu. I was so desperate and emotional. You don't want to cry at all? Love does fade, huh?"

Lin Qingyu ruffled his short hair. "My love won't fade. It will only move from the great general to the emperor."

Jiang Xing smiled. "Makes sense."

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Although Jiang Xing had acted out all the details of his death, Lin Qingyu sent for Shen Huaishi nonetheless. Shen Huaishi had been waiting a long time to speak with Lin Qingyu in private. As soon as he entered the

room, however, he found that Lin Qingyu had dismissed anyone unneeded—except the emperor.

Only after returning to the capital had Shen Huaishi learned that a new emperor had been enthroned. He knew nothing about that new emperor except that he was intellectually disabled and had once been confined to Jinyang Palace. Although Shen Huaishi himself had grown up in the palace, he'd never set eyes on this presumed heir. Despite the heavy weight he shouldered and the sorrow in his heart, Shen Huaishi still noticed that the emperor was extremely handsome, even more so than Great General Gu. His looks were even comparable to Lin Qingyu's.

What shocked Shen Huaishi most, however, was neither the emperor's appearance nor his oddly short hair. It was the way Lin Qingyu looked at him.

Lin Qingyu was so cold. Who could he be so gentle with other than Gu Fuzhou?

As thoughts flew through Shen Huaishi's mind like a storm, he heard Lin Qingyu say, "When I asked you to go to the northwest last year, I only asked one thing of you—to protect the general so that he could return safely."

As Lin Qingyu spoke, Jiang Xing sat beside him, listening to them while making a game of stacking memorials.

Shen Huaishi lowered his head. "I failed to follow your orders, Lord Lin. I apologize to you and the general. However you wish to punish me, I will accept it with no complaints."

"Did you try your best?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Shen Huaishi gritted his teeth. "I only wish that I'd died in his stead."

After Gu Fuzhou's death, the only thought in Shen Huaishi's mind had been that it would've been better if *he'd* died. He was a bachelor with nothing tethering him to the world. If he'd perished, it wouldn't have caused anyone pain. It would certainly have been worth exchanging his life for Gu Fuzhou's to save Great Yu's war god.

"Given what you did for him, for Great Yu, how could I blame you?" Lin Qingyu asked coolly.

Shen Huaishi abruptly raised his head, looking at Lin Qingyu as if at a stranger.

“What do you plan to do now?” Lin Qingyu asked. “I know you won’t want to stay in the capital. If you wish to return to the border, I’ll arrange it.”

“I…” Shen Huaishi swallowed. “I do want to stay in the capital temporarily. I want to send Great General Gu off this last time.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “As you wish. I’ll provide the soldiers in the northwest with an explanation for the stolen rations.”

Here, their conversation was just about over. So when he saw that Shen Huaishi was still standing in the same spot, Lin Qingyu asked, “Do you have something else to say?”

Shen Huaishi hesitated for a long time. “Lord Lin, before Great General Gu died, he said a lot…” He clenched his fists. “He begged me—begged me to save him. He told me that he’d promised you that he would return. I was useless; I couldn’t save him… I could only watch him die. I couldn’t do anything…”

Shen Huaishi’s eyes were full of tears. He was crying so hard that he could barely speak.

Since Jiang Xing had already acted all that out, Lin Qingyu wasn’t so touched. The only words he said were, “I know.”

Shen Huaishi was shocked. “Lord Lin…?”

“Since he’d made a promise to me, he desperately wanted to live. Still, he didn’t come home. So I’ll still hold him responsible and feel anger toward him.” Lin Qingyu laughed coldly. “I’ll resent him all my life.”

Shen Huaishi stilled. Tears slid down his cheeks; one landed on the back of his hand, its skin rough and tanned after all the hardship Shen Huaishi had experienced.

He’d thought that, cold and cruel as Lin Qingyu was, he would treat Gu Fuzhou differently. But he’d been wrong about him.

Or perhaps he’d never known Lin Qingyu at all.

Shen Huaishi could no longer hold back. “How can you speak those cruel words when countless arrows pierced the great general’s chest, Lord Lin?!”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes flew open, and he jerked around to stare at Jiang Xing.

Oh no, Jiang Xing thought. The house of memorials he’d spent such effort building had collapsed.

Chapter 108

AFTER SHEN HUAISHI LEFT, burning with indignation, night fell. Lin Qingyu and Jiang Xing looked at each other over the scattered memorials, both speechless.

Feeling the icy rage emanating from Lin Qingyu, Jiang Xing panicked a little. He'd upset Lin Qingyu again. He wasn't afraid of Lin Qingyu's anger, but he was afraid that he'd be unable to comfort him.

As Jiang Xing racked his brains for what to do, Auntie Xiujiao came in. "Lord Lin, it's time for the emperor to sleep."

They had already broken the rules by allowing Lin Qingyu to spend the night at Xingqing Palace. Even the empress dowager might not agree to Lin Qingyu and the emperor sleeping in the same *room*. For the past couple of days, Lin Qingyu had lived in the side palace, only a few steps from the emperor's bedchambers, Still, he didn't feel like that was enough. When he couldn't sleep, or when he woke from a nightmare, he peeked into the main palace just to ensure that Jiang Xing was still there.

At this point, he certainly didn't want to let Jiang Xing leave. "I forbid you to go," he blurted out.

The iciness of Lin Qingyu's voice scared Auntie Xiujiao. Lord Lin wasn't easy to get along with in the first place, and now that his husband was dead, he was definitely grieving. No one dared upset him.

"You're dismissed for now," Jiang Xing told Auntie Xiujiao gently.

Auntie Xiujiao was stunned. When had the emperor begun to speak like an adult man? He even sounded as though he was used to holding a position of power. But she didn't have time to think about it; she bowed and left quickly.

Jiang Xing peered at Lin Qingyu's face. "Jiang Xing, you're truly a liar," he said coldly. "How much more are you keeping from me?!"

"You're pretending to be me now?" Lin Qingyu frowned.

Jiang Xing pulled him in by the waist, smiling. “I’m saying your words for you so that you can rest.”

“You said…it was quick,” Lin Qingyu said quietly.

“It *was* quick. Countless arrows pierced my chest. Did you expect that to be slow?” Jiang Xing said, mixing truth and falsehood. “To be really honest, I think that was a better death than dying slowly from an illness.”

Lin Qingyu closed his eyes, clenching his fists. “The lines you spoke just now were wrong.”

“Hm?”

“I wouldn’t call you a liar.”

“Oh, right! You’d call me a *bastard*,” Jiang Xing realized.

“I’d say ‘Jiang Xing is a big idiot,’” Lin Qingyu told him, word for word.

Jiang Xing laughed aloud. “You’re not mad anymore, darling?” Lin Qingyu was unusually easy to comfort today.

Lin Qingyu shook his head. “I don’t have the energy.” He lowered his head to Jiang Xing’s shoulder, voice shaking slightly as he continued, “Why must you always be in agony? It was like that when you were Lu Wancheng, and even when you became Gu Fuzhou, you couldn’t escape it.”

Jiang Xing smiled. “I’m curious about that too. Why is it always me? I don’t think I’ve done anything bad.”

Lin Qingyu stiffened, and his eyes suddenly widened. Embracing him, Jiang Xing immediately noticed his odd demeanor. Lowering his head, he asked, “What’s wrong?”

Steadying his breaths, Lin Qingyu pressed even closer. “…Nothing. Can you stay tonight?”

Jiang Xing carried Lin Qingyu to the bed. “Great General Gu died in battle, and losing the love of his life has devastated Lady Gu,” he said solemnly. “Let this emperor comfort you.”

Lin Qingyu buried his head in the crook of Jiang Xing’s neck and laughed quietly. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Jiang Xing stayed until Lin Qingyu fell asleep, then slipped away to the main palace, although it was painful to leave his wife's warm embrace to return to his cold, empty bed.

He needed to find some way to sleep with Lin Qingyu without needing to hide it. At present, they were merely sleeping, but later, it would be terrible to have to get up and leave right after sex. That was such playboy behavior. More importantly, he was genuinely tired of having to go back and forth every night.

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News of Gu Fuzhou's death spread through the capital. Everyone, be they imperial official or commoner, sighed and mourned his passing. In the army, many muscular men cried until their eyes swelled. When Duke Wu heard of the general's death, tears fell from his eyes too, and he questioned the heavens emphatically. Wu Zhan was so devastated, he was a shadow of his former self; white hair sprouted overnight on his temples, and he seemed drained of energy and spirit. Even officials who hadn't liked Gu Fuzhou had to put on an act and shed alligator tears.

Rumors whispered that the new emperor was slowly learning the ways of the world, and that when he'd learned of Gu Fuzhou's death, he'd mourned him like a brother. He'd cut his hair in grief and even allowed Gu Fuzhou to be enshrined in the royal ancestral temple, hoping to appease his soul in heaven.

Lin Qingyu was Gu Fuzhou's widow and the only master left of the general's residence. Thus, he had to return to manage the funeral affairs, clad head to toe in mourning white. His robes were the color of snow, and even the ribbon in his hair was as pure and clean as white jade.

Jiang Xing's eyes lit up. "Whose beautiful little widow is this?" he said with a smile. "Come, give this emperor a hug."

Although Lin Qingyu didn't much care about social rules, he *was* wearing mourning robes. Being affectionate with a man would be a bit much right now.

“Stop that,” he said. “I’m going back home. You…”

“I’ll stay in the palace and wait for you obediently,” Jiang Xing volunteered. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. After a few steps, though, he hurried back in worry. “Didn’t you want to go see the little gu creatures? They’ve gotten so big already.”

Jiang Xing smiled lazily. “Okay.”

Letting out a breath of relief, Lin Qingyu summoned Xiaosongzi to help Jiang Xing change. “If the empress dowager asks, say that His Majesty is sleeping and doesn’t wish to be bothered.”

Jiang Xing was now dressed like the young heir of a wealthy family. Since his short hairstyle was too eye-catching, Lin Qingyu added a hooded fox-fur scarf. None of the servants at the Gu residence had ever seen Xiao Li, so they probably wouldn’t recognize him.

The two boarded the carriage, and Jiang Xing joked, “Why did you ask Xiaosongzi to cover for us? He’s as chatty as a songbird.”

“In front of me, his lips are tight. He’s trustworthy.”

Jiang Xing’s smile faded. “This…”

Outside the general’s residence, Yuan Yin, Huantong, Hualu, Zhang Shiquan, and the other servants were already waiting. From afar, Lin Qingyu and Jiang Xing saw only tragic white. Jiang Xing looked at the *Gu Manor* plaque outside the door, now draped in white banners, and felt as though a very long time had passed.

Lin Qingyu hadn’t been back to the manor since Jiang Xing entered his dream seven days after dying. Yuan Yin was a hardworking man, and after he’d received the news, he’d managed to suppress his sorrow and set up an altar, preparing everything on his own. “Lady, you’ve returned.”

Huantong’s eyes were swollen. “Young Master, is it true? Is the general…gone? He’s so strong. How could he just… Did they make a mistake?”

Lin Qingyu didn’t answer the question. “Don’t stand out here. Let’s go inside.”

When Yuan Yin saw the youth following Lin Qingyu, he was stunned for a moment. “Lady, who’s this?”

“Don’t mind him. He’s just going to follow me.”

Gu Fuzhou’s body had yet to arrive in the capital, but a never-ending stream of mourners visited the residence nonetheless. Many were Gu Fuzhou’s onetime subordinates, which forced Lin Qingyu to interact with them. Jiang Xing hid in a side hall, listening to sobs from behind a curtain until he nearly fell asleep—or, at least, until loud bawling started.

“It was me! I killed the general! If I hadn’t forced him to go northwest, how could this have happened?! General, oh, General, what will Great Yu do without you…? My misdeed will go down in the history of Great Yu!”

Yuan Yin saw Wu Zhan sobbing uncontrollably and asked Lin Qingyu, “Are you going to comfort General Wu, Lady?”

“No need. Let him cry.” Lin Qingyu knelt in front of Gu Fuzhou’s altar.

As Wu Zhan cried his eyes out, more people arrived. Zhang Shiquan announced them all to Lin Qingyu. “Madam, Lord Li from the army is here.”

Only one person in the army had the family name Li: Li Chan. Jiang Xing had heard Lin Qingyu talk about Li Chan before; he’d said that Li Chan was “both refined and virtuous, someone who can be granted responsibilities.” That was much higher praise than he’d given Xiaosongzi—after all, Li Chan was “refined” *and* “virtuous.”

Jiang Xing lifted the curtain just in time to see Li Chan walk in. He was handsome, and he had a scholar’s grace. As Jiang Xing had expected, he looked like a talented young man.

Holding sticks of incense, Li Chan bowed three times in front of Gu Fuzhou’s altar. Then he walked to Lin Qingyu. “Lord Lin.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Lord Li.”

Li Chan couldn’t help but reach out, wanting to touch those slender shoulders. But just as his hand was about to make contact, it fell. In the end,

he didn’t have the courage and only dared to comfort the widow with words. “The dead cannot come back. My condolences, Lord Lin.”

Jiang Xing laughed quietly and let the curtain fall, continuing to doze.

Hualu and Huantong both knelt in front of the firepan, burning paper money. “Why is Young Master so calm?” Hualu muttered.

“Did you forget? When the young marquess passed, Young Master was calm too. But he felt worse than anyone else.”

Hualu shook her head. “It’s not the same.” She felt the subtle difference between then and now, but she couldn’t tell exactly what it was.

After sunset, the guests slowly left. According to Great Yu’s customs, Lin Qingyu now had to hold vigil for three nights.

Seeing that Lin Qingyu had dismissed all the servants, Jiang Xing walked out, yawning. Lin Qingyu glanced at him. “Want to burn some incense for yourself?”

“Nah.” Jiang Xing hugged him from behind. “Qingyu, I’m sleepy.”

“Go sleep, then.”

“Come with me,” Jiang Xing said dozily.

Glancing at Gu Fuzhou’s altar, Lin Qingyu removed Jiang Xing’s hands. “I’m flattered, Your Majesty, by your love for me. But right now, I’m holding vigil for Great General Gu.”

Jiang Xing laughed, closing his eyes. “Well, hearing that mentioned, this emperor is no longer sleepy. Beloved official, how do you want to hold vigil for Great General Gu?”

“At the very least, I can’t sleep with you in his home.”

“It’s okay.” Jiang Xing’s bright, clear eyes held a hint of mischievousness. “We can be sneaky. No one will know.”

Lin Qingyu was speechless.

“So, want to have an affair with me, Lady Gu?” The last two words, spoken with a smile, revealed a hint of lust.

“Your body isn’t even eighteen yet,” Lin Qingyu said calmly.

Jiang Xing froze. “Huh…?”

“I remember you saying that, in your hometown, there are heavy restrictions on men who aren’t yet eighteen. They cannot marry, and they aren’t encouraged to indulge in sexual pleasure.” Lin Qingyu paused. “You also said that it’s illegal to have sex with someone who’s intellectually disabled.”

“Did I?” Jiang Xing pretended not to recollect.

Lin Qingyu scoffed. “Would I misremember?”

“But I’m *not* disabled anymore. Besides, I’m in Great Yu now, so why do I still have to follow the customs of my home? Here, if someone marries early, they could even have two children by the time they turn seventeen,” Jiang Xing said. “Wait—you’re really going to wait until this body turns eighteen to have sex with me again? But I so rarely find a physical activity that I don’t mind tiring myself out for! How can you strike me down like this?”

Lin Qingyu smiled at his despair. Seeing him smile as he wore mourning robes, Jiang Xing felt heat rush to his face, and he lowered his head to kiss Lin Qingyu.

“Not here.” Lin Qingyu raised a hand to block him.

Jiang Xing grabbed his hand. “I insist.”

When the kiss landed, Lin Qingyu’s heart jumped, and his body trembled. He couldn’t see Jiang Xing’s face clearly: The candlelight was too dim, and Jiang Xing was too close. He only saw a blurred outline.

Ridiculous. The word flashed through Lin Qingyu’s mind. He put his hand against Jiang Xing’s chest but couldn’t push him away.

Jiang Xing felt that and laughed. “You’re so nervous, darling—is it because your dead husband is watching?”

Lin Qingyu couldn’t retort to that when his lips were kissed again. He’d never been a contradictory person; since he couldn’t escape, why not enjoy the kiss in peace? Lin Qingyu closed his eyes. The altar disappeared, leaving only the youth’s gentle, passionate touches and natural, clean aura.

Suddenly, a small noise came from a dark corner.

Jiang Xing slowly raised his eyes. He saw only a hurriedly retreating shadow. He couldn’t see the person’s face, but from their figure, he already knew who it was.

Even with his skills, that person must’ve been scared to death of leaving behind evidence of his presence.

Lin Qingyu’s body was limp from the kiss, a low moan slipping from his lips. He clearly couldn’t hear anything right now.

Jiang Xing’s breath caught in his chest, and he immediately forgot about the incident, focusing on kissing the mourning beauty in his arms.

Chapter 109

JIANG XING COULDN'T STAY OUTSIDE the palace for too long. After kissing the little widow, he paid a visit to Second Young Lady Gu and Third Young Master Gu. When he left for the northwest, the two insects had only been the size of a thumbnail, but now they were as thick as a finger. It was evident how well Lin Qingyu cared for them. Then Jiang Xing returned to the palace under the cover of night.

Xiaosongzi helped him change. If Lin Qingyu said that Xiaosongzi was tight-lipped and trustworthy, then naturally, he was. "Xiaosongzi."

"Your Majesty?"

"Summon Shen Huaishi to me."

Xiaosongzi could only stare. It was his first time seeing the emperor speak so many words at once, his tone no longer childish but as mature as that of a normal adult. *Has the emperor suddenly recovered completely…?*

"What?" Jiang Xing smiled. "Did you not understand?"

Xiaosongzi returned to his senses. "This lowly servant shall go now," he said hastily.

"One more thing." Jiang Xing's tone was gentle but laced with a hint of warning. "Whatever I say or do inside the palace, I don't wish anyone other than Lord Lin to know."

Xiaosongzi gulped. "I understand."

Shen Huaishi was always difficult to find. Even if the emperor had personally ordered it, bringing him to the palace was still an immense effort for Xiaosongzi.

When Shen Huaishi finally arrived at Xingqing Palace, only an hour remained until sunrise. The messenger had said that the emperor had summoned him, but why would the emperor want to see him without reason? Shen Huashi guessed that Lin Qingyu must have summoned him under the emperor's name.

Lin Qingyu, the emperor…and what Shen Huaishi had just seen. Shen Huaishi's eyes fogged over in anger as he clenched his fists.

No wonder Lin Qingyu had been so calm in the face of Great General Gu's death. His dalliance with the emperor must have begun long before Great General Gu died…

But the general had still been thinking of Lin Qingyu. Before he died, all he'd thought of was Lin Qingyu.

Shen Huaishi forced himself to suppress the anger in his heart as he stepped inside the palace. He'd thought that he would see Lin Qingyu inside Xingqing Palace, but the young emperor was alone. He sat on the throne, clad in black-dragon robes, resting with his eyes closed and his head propped up on his hand.

"Your Majesty, Shen-gongzi has arrived," Xiaosongzi said.

Jiang Xing opened his eyes and smiled. "Shen-gongzi made me wait a while."

Shen Huaishi furrowed his brow. He had heard that the emperor was recovering from the affliction to his soul, but recovery didn't happen overnight. Yet the emperor in front of him didn't seem at all intellectually impaired.

Completely confused, Shen Huaishi lifted his robes to kneel. "This lowly subordinate greets Your Majesty."

"Summon the imperial preceptor as well," Jiang Xing told Xiaosongzi.

After Xiaosongzi left, Jiang Xing observed Shen Huaishi. "You don't look very well, Shen-gongzi. Today, Lord Lin returned to the general's manor to manage his funeral rites. You must have gone there to grieve too. I'm quite curious about what you saw there."

Shen Huaishi's eyes dimmed. "I…saw nothing," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Good." Jiang Xing walked to the window, watching the sky turn as pale as a fish's belly. "It's daybreak? Good."

Shen Huaishi froze, staring up at the odd emperor.

That was the last sentence that Great General Gu had said before dying, and only Shen Huaishi had heard it. Was it coincidence that the emperor had summoned him so late at night to say that? Or did it have a deeper meaning?

Shen Huaishi quickly answered that question for himself. The emperor had spoken a very common phrase, and the sky *was* brightening. There was nothing strange about the emperor saying that.

Seeing the hesitation on Shen Huaishi's face, Jiang Xing smiled. "I once asked you a question that you didn't answer at the time. But for some reason, I really want to know the answer today, so I summoned you."

Sweat beaded on Shen Huaishi's forehead. "I am a lowly subordinate and do not understand. Please let me know what question I should answer, Your Majesty."

"Did you use the pill that my wife gave you to fake your death?"

Cold sweat erupted all over Shen Huaishi's body. "Your Majesty…?" he managed to say.

Jiang Xing stopped smiling, serious for once. "This journey was hard on you, Huaishi."

Shen Huaishi was completely lost now. He wasn't good with words to begin with, and now, he was so shocked that he was utterly tongue-tied.

Jiang Xing had expected that reaction. Most people wouldn't believe that someone's soul had transmigrated, and it was difficult to explain. Thankfully, Xu Junyuan arrived at that point; the duty to explain what had happened to Shen Huaishi now fell to him.

Xu Junyuan never would have guessed that the emperor had summoned him in the dead of night for this. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Nonetheless, he faithfully told Shen Huaishi the story of Gu Fuzhou's soul finding its home in the emperor's body.

Shen Huaishi's mind went completely blank. He felt like his entire world was a lie. This was unbelievable—but once he *did* believe it, it suddenly answered many odd questions.

Why had the emperor suddenly recovered from the affliction to his soul? Why had Lin Qingyu reacted calmly to Gu Fuzhou's death? Why had

Lin Qingyu and the emperor done…*that* in front of Gu Fuzhou's altar?

But…soul transmigration? Did something so unbelievable really exist?

"It does," Jiang Xing said. "If you don't believe me, you can ask me a few questions that only Gu Fuzhou would know the answer to."

After this series of shocks, Shen Huaishi's mind was slow. After a long time, he finally began a question. "Before the battle, General Wu caught two soldiers acting like cut-sleeves…"

"You're asking their names? Jiang Shiyue and Lin Lan." When Shen Huaishi reminded him of them, Jiang Xing's heart felt heavy. He needed to ask Lin Qingyu about compensation for the soldiers' families.

Shen Huaishi looked even more shocked now. At this point, he probably thought the entire world was a hallucination.

"Huaishi," Jiang Xing resumed. "You were the one with Great General Gu until the very end. Only you know what he said before dying. Can you tell me what that was?"

"General Gu said he didn't want to die," Shen Huaishi replied reflexively. "He said…he said that Imperial Physician Lin was still waiting for him."

Jiang Xing shook his head. "You misremember. What Great General Gu said before dying was that he couldn't hold on any longer. He didn't want Imperial Physician Lin to be a widow for the rest of his life. He hoped that his wife would find another good person that he loved and stay with them until both their hair turned gray—*that* was Great General Gu's dying wish. So if Imperial Physician Lin actually stayed alone until he died, the general would begrudge that forever." Sighing, Jiang Xing continued, "I've heard the imperial preceptor say that those with strong wishes and grudges, those who didn't die in peace, cannot enter the reincarnation cycle. They can only return to the world as ghosts, unable to accept incense or paper money. Ah, how pitiful."

Something dawned on Xu Junyuan, and he smiled. "This is as I'd expect of the emperor. I was quite confused about why Your Majesty was admitting the truth to Shen-gongzi rather than the empress dowager. I see now."

Shen Huaishi, who was an honest person, couldn't quite understand. "But Great General Gu *didn't* say that."

Jiang Xing smiled. "He could have."

***

A fortnight later, Gu Fuzhou's body returned to the capital along with Shi Pei. Lin Qingyu and officials from the Ministry of Rites personally welcomed them outside the town, greeting them with the highest honors in the land.

When Gu Fuzhou left for the northwest, it had been with a majestic procession of cavalrymen accompanied by melancholic song and drumbeats. Yet when he returned, he was only a silent, unmoving, fatally injured corpse.

Shi Pei and his trusted men had protected Gu Fuzhou's coffin all the way from the northwest. When these war-torn men saw the city gates, tears filled their eyes. "General, we've finally brought you home."

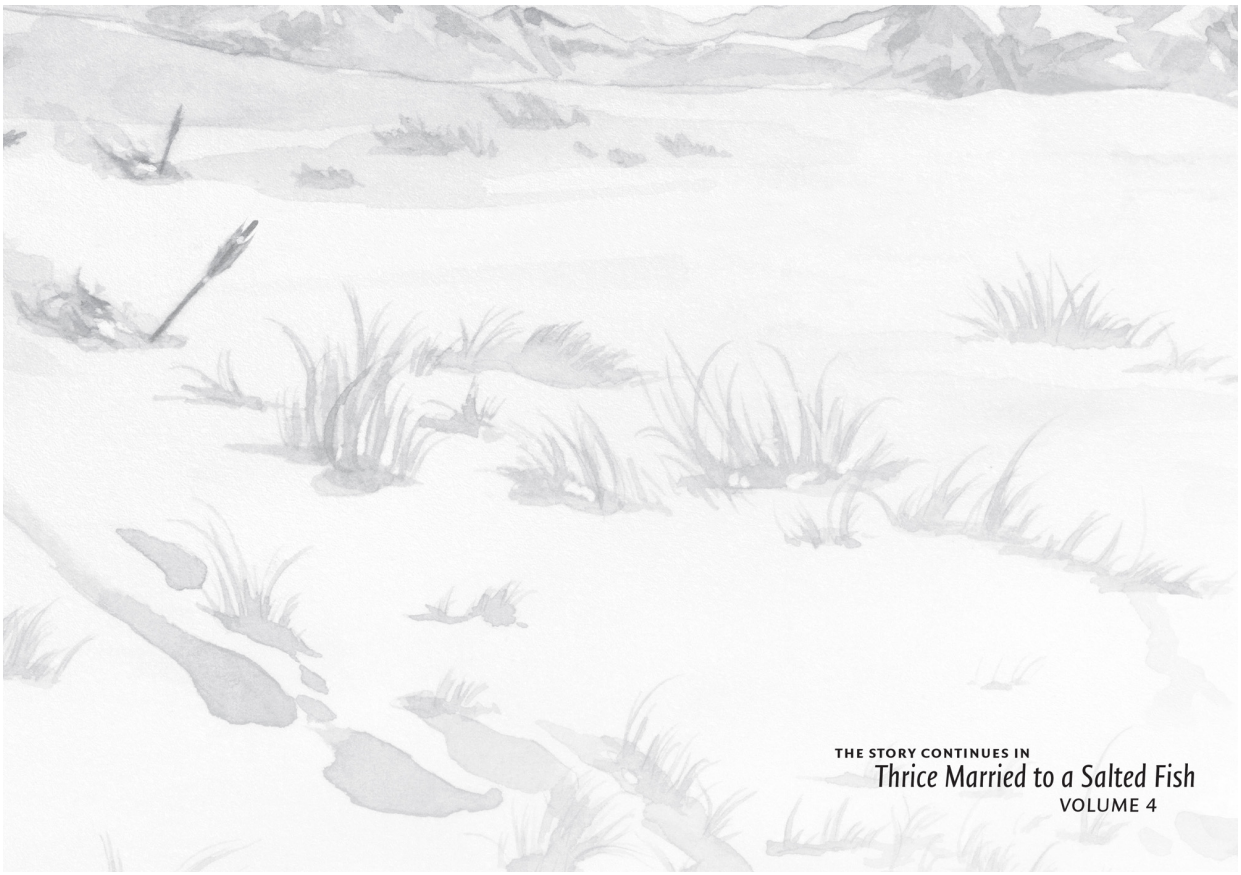
Gu Fuzhou had no parents, and no one knew where his ancestral graveyard was. Given his sacrifices for the empire, the empress dowager allowed him to be buried in the royal graveyard. He was the first official since Great Yu's founding to be so honored.

Shi Pei gave the Qingyun Jiuzhou spear to Lin Qingyu, asking hoarsely, "Would you like to see him one last time, Lady?"

Lin Qingyu stared at the coffin, hesitating for a long time, before shaking his head. "I won't disturb his peace. Place this Qingyun Jiuzhou spear in the ground to accompany the general as quickly as possible."

There was no need to dwell on the past. Insisting on that would only bring unnecessary frustration. Jiang Xing hoped that Lin Qingyu could leave it behind—and, regardless, he *had* to leave it behind.

Just as he'd bidden farewell to Lu Wancheng, he must bid farewell to Gu Fuzhou. From now on, the only person to walk beside him would be Jiang Xing.


THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Thrice Married to a Salted Fish
VOLUME 4

Character Guide & Glossary

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

GU FUZHOU 顾扶洲: Surname Gu, given name Fuzhou. Titled “great general.” Nicknamed the “war god” of the Great Yu Empire.

LIN QINGYU 林清羽: Surname Lin, given name Qingyu. Imperial physician. Extremely skilled in medicine.

JIANG XING 江醒: Surname Jiang, given name Xing. A young man from modern China who transmigrated into Great Yu.

ROYAL FAMILY AND IMPERIAL COURT

THE EMPEROR 皇上: The unnamed ruler of Great Yu.

EMPRESS WEN 温皇后: Empress of Great Yu. Mother of sixth prince Xiao Li.

NOBLE CONSORT CHEN 陈贵妃: Beloved concubine of the emperor. Mother of Crown Prince Xiao Cheng.

XIAO CHENG 萧琤: Son of Noble Consort Chen. Crown prince of Great Yu.

XIAO JIE 萧玠: Fourth prince of Great Yu.

XIAO LI 萧璃: Son of Empress Wen. Sixth prince of Great Yu.

THE PRINCE OF HENG 恒亲王: Xiao Li’s ninth uncle. A first-rank prince.

CUI LIAN 崔敛: Prime minister of Great Yu.

THE MARQUESS OF NAN’AN 南安侯: Minister of revenue. Father of Lin Qingyu’s late husband, Lu Wancheng.

LI CHAN 李潺: Assistant minister of national defense.

ARMY OF GREAT YU

DUKE WU 武国公: Most respected warrior of the previous emperor's rule.

WU YOUYUAN 武攸远: Duke Wu's grandson. Young general who admires Gu Fuzhou.

SHI PEI 史沛: Fourth-rank general. Titled "mighty general."

DEPUTY GENERAL ZHAO MINGWEI 赵明威: Official serving in Great Yu's army.

GENERAL WU ZHAN 吴战: Official serving in Great Yu's army.

DEPARTMENT OF IMPERIAL PHYSICIANS

LIN RUSHAN 林汝善: Lin Qingyu's father. Head imperial physician.

CHU ZHENGDE 褚正德: Lin Qingyu's colleague at the department.

MISCELLANEOUS

HUANTONG 欢瞳/HUALU 花露: Servants of Lin Qingyu.

PRINCESS JINGCHUN 静淳郡主: Maid from Great Yu who married into the North Kingdom.

SHEN HUAISHI 沈淮识: Former shadow guard of Xiao Cheng.

XU JUNYUAN 徐君愿/"HALF-IMMORTAL XU" 徐半仙: Imperial preceptor of Great Yu.

ZHANG SHIQUAN 张世全: Accountant from Gu Fuzhou's residence.

ZHU YONGXIN 朱永新: Onetime Tianyu Sect member now living as a butcher.

YUAN YIN 袁寅: Steward of Gu Fuzhou.

XI RONG 奚容: Steward of Xiao Jie.

XIAOSONGZI 小松子: A eunuch with a reputation for having a loose tongue. Becomes a trusted confidant of Lin Qingyu.

XIAOXUANZI 小轩子: Personal eunuch of Xiao Jie.

AUNTIE XIUJIAO 秀娇嬷嬷: Servant of Xiao Li. Confidante of Empress Wen.

XIE MIN 谢敏: Leader of the Tianji Guard.

LOCATIONS

IMPERIAL PALACE

QINZHENG HALL 勤政殿: The venue where morning court is held.

ZICHEN HALL 紫宸殿: The emperor is crowned here and takes meetings here.

XINGQING PALACE 兴庆宫: The emperor's residence.

CI'AN PALACE 慈安宫: The empress dowager's residence.

JINYANG PALACE 晋阳园: The imperial summer palace. Xiao Li's residence.

ELSEWHERE

CHANGSHENG TEMPLE 长生寺: The most revered temple in Great Yu. Xu Junyuan practices here.

INSTITUTIONS

IMPERIAL ACADEMY OF MEDICINE 太医署: Where aspiring imperial physicians train.

DEPARTMENT OF IMPERIAL PHYSICIANS 太医院: Where imperial physicians work. They treat members of the royal family, including the emperor.

TIANJI GUARD 天机营: Group of shadow guards working for the emperor.

TIANYU SECT 天狱门: Defunct secret counterpart of the Tianji Guard.

NAME GUIDE

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

LAO-: Prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname. Used in informal contexts to indicate familiarity.

-DAGE: Suffix meaning “big brother” or “older brother.”

XIAO-: Prefix meaning “little” or “younger.” Can be added before names or titles for juniors. Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: “Child.” Affectionate suffix.

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable of a disyllabic name.

Family

-GEGE: Older brother or older male. Can be used as an affectionate address.

-XIONG: Can refer to older brother or male friend. More respectful and distant than -gege.

Other

-GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

GLOSSARY

SALTED FISH 咸鱼: Modern slang term describing someone unambitious or lazy.

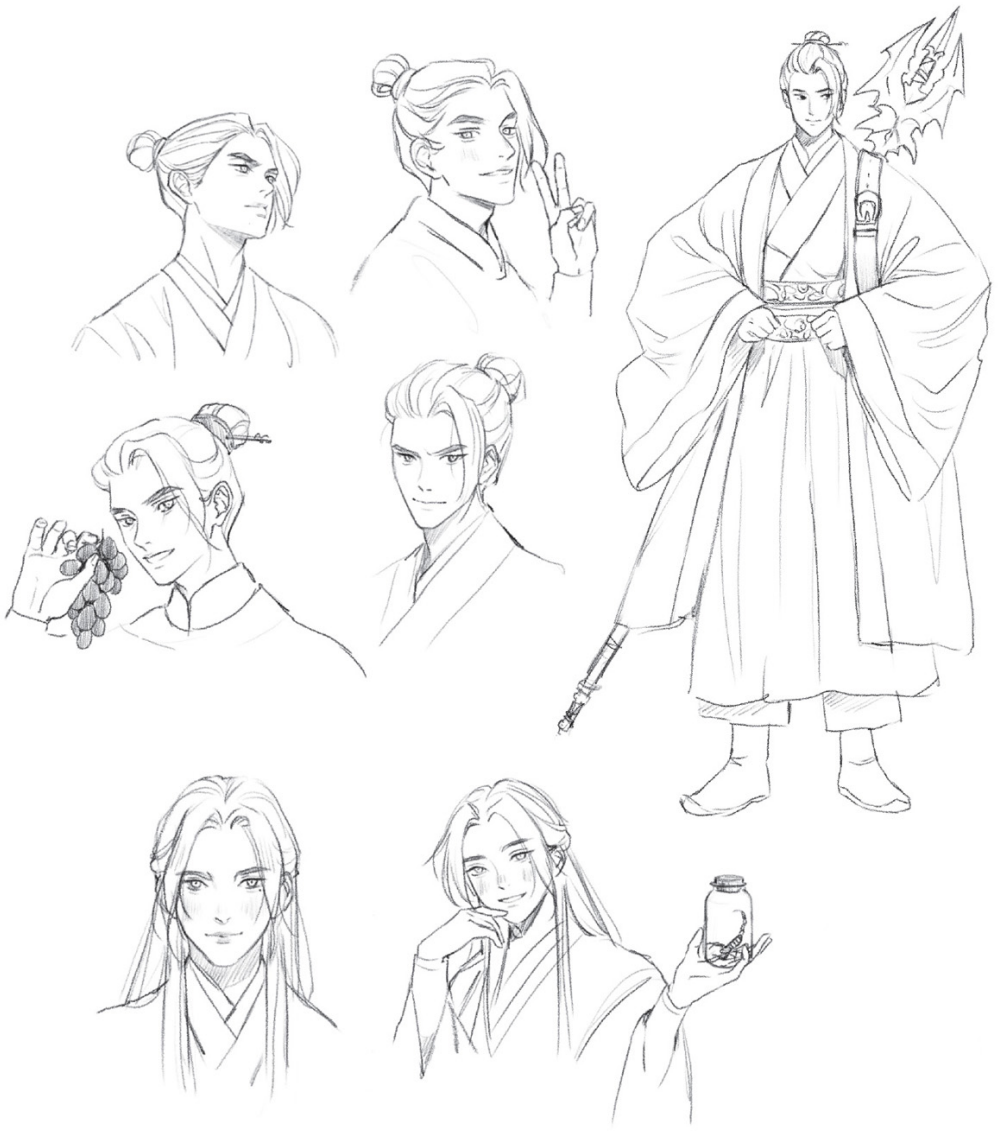
BAZI 八字: Eight characters that comprise four pairs denoting the time, date, month, and year of someone's birth. They are used to divine someone's fortune or determine someone's marital compatibility with another person, among other purposes.

TAKING ONE'S PULSE 诊脉: In traditional Chinese medicine, taking someone's pulse enables the physician to gain a deeper understanding of a patient's ailments and thus give a diagnosis.

"IF ODD, CHANGE; IF EVEN, REMAIN THE SAME; AND THE SIGN DEPENDS ON THE QUADRANT NAME." 奇变偶不变，符号看象限: A mnemonic rhyme for students studying basic trigonometry.

GU 蛊: Insects or reptiles specially bred for venom or to serve as a component in harmful magic. Gu creatures are usually created by confining several insect and/or reptile species; after they fight, the surviving insect or reptile becomes the gu creatures.

Character Sketches



Footnotes

Chapter 74

[1] Lyrics from “Be Apart” by Jennifer Chan.

[2] “Cut-sleeve” is a euphemism for a gay man.

[3] In MOBAs and strategy games, a “jungler” takes charge of the area between lanes (the “jungle”).

[4] Given to someone younger during New Year’s to wish them good health, happiness, and fortune.

[5] From “Spring Banquet” by Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period poet Feng Yanji.

[6] From “Spring Banquet.”

[7] “Crown prince.”

Chapter 75

[8] A chess-like game played with black and white stone pieces on a grid. Better known in the West as Go.

Chapter 76

[9] Lyrics from “Give Me the Time of a Song” by Jay Chou.

Chapter 77

[10] From “A Gift for Fan Ye” by Jin dynasty poet Lu Kai.

[11] From the Book of Odes collection, which dates to the Western Zhou period.

[12] From “Song of the Yue Boatman,” a short song in an ancient language from Southern China.

Chapter 79

[13] A period in the traditional Chinese calendar named for the spring thunderstorms that awaken hibernating insects.

Chapter 80

[14] From the Zuo Zhuan.

[15] The title of the “Ghost Commander” comes from an idiom for “elusive” (神出鬼没), which contains the character for “ghost” (鬼).

[16] The Chinese emperor was considered a ruler with a divine mandate and a symbolic connection to the dragon.

[17] The rare alignment of Saturn, Venus, Mercury, and the moon.

[18] From the Book of Han by Eastern Han historians Ban Gu and Ban Zhao.

[19] A catchall term for the isolated, ill-kept side palaces where out-of-favor consorts were sent to live.

Chapter 84

[20] Plaza dancing is a dance and exercise routine conducted in public places like town squares and plazas. It is popular with middle-aged and older women in modern China.

[21] A musical instrument with seven strings.

[22] A musical instrument with two strings.

Chapter 87

[23] Ornate accessories worn by those of high status to protect their nails and show that they didn't need to use their hands for manual labor.

Chapter 89

[24] Poetry collection attributed to Zhou dynasty poet Qu Yuan.

Chapter 90

[25] From "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" by Tang dynasty politician and poet Bai Juyi.

[26] From "Spring Banquet."

Chapter 96

[27] "Qinzheng" means "to attend to government affairs diligently."

[28] The emperor's sons and brothers are first-rank princes, the next-highest royal rank.

Chapter 97

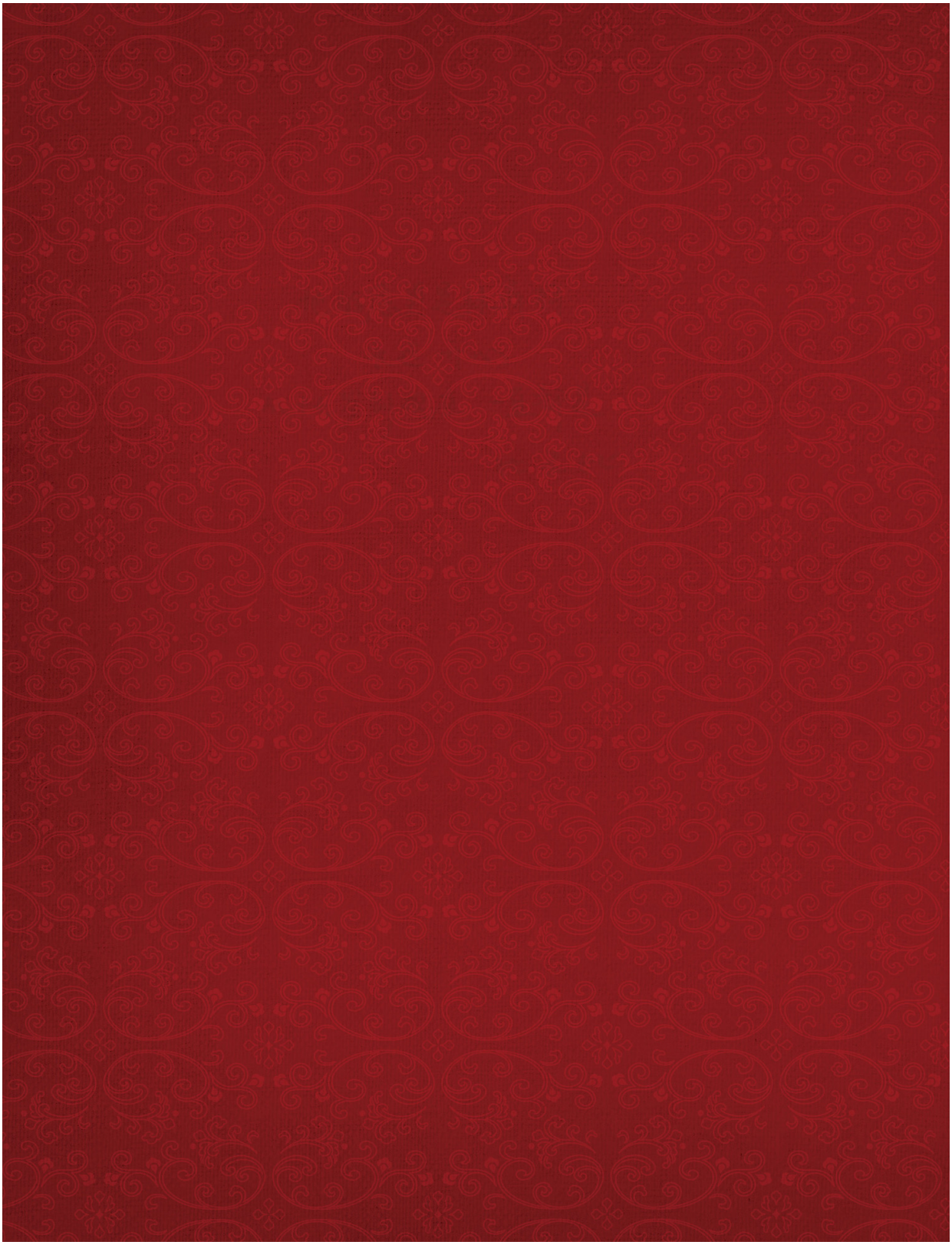
[29] From “Newly Added Melody to Willow Branch Lyrics, Poem Two” by Tang dynasty poet Wen Tingyun. Red beans were embedded into dice to mark the pips.

Chapter 98

[30] Four zhang is over forty feet.

Chapter 101

[31] From “Waves Scouring the Sands: Reminiscence” by the last emperor of the Tang dynasty, Li Yu.



Scandal and Slaughter

Beautiful, devious imperial physician Lin Qingyu has reunited with his husband, Gu Fuzhou. That leaves Lin Qingyu plenty of time to work against his archenemy, Crown Prince Xiao Cheng. Soon, Lin Qingyu uncovers Xiao Cheng's deepest secret—one that could ruin the prince. Yet the only piece of evidence Lin Qingyu can put forward is a purple silk belt. Could such a humble item really interfere with an ascension to the throne, or will Lin Qingyu's loathing of Xiao Cheng lead him to overplay his hand?

Gu Fuzhou likewise faces a daunting choice as Great Yu continues to fight a war in the northwest, and the nation's troops face increasingly grueling and grim circumstances. Everyone in court—and in the northwest—understands that victory is only possible if Great General Gu returns to the front. But Gu Fuzhou barely survived his last tour of duty. Does he dare leave the capital for the northwest, knowing that Lin Qingyu could be widowed *again*?

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